



Abyss Gate

Volume 1 On the Shore of the Bottomless Abyss

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When he turned around, the village was gone.

Ah.

Without even noticing that he had let out a small sound, the boy's eyes tremble.

Until just now.

There should have been a small village here.

Grandfather was there, and Father, and Mother, and his little brother. And the neighborhood children he used to play with.

He had heard his mother's voice only moments ago: Go pick up some firewood for me.

What had he said when he refused his little brother's voice asking to come along?

He had a vague feeling that Grandfather had said something, but why hadn't he listened properly?

Be careful on your way, Father had said, turning his back, busy tending to his hunting tools.

He dashed out of the house and ran out of the village. He had started climbing the gentle hill leading into the forest.

Behind him, so many voices. So much murmur.

And then.

With a single thundering impact.

Only a brief scream.

Everyone — vanished.

What lay before the boy who had turned around was a quiet, quiet, deep blue, deep blue

—

Expanse of water.

In the place where the village should have been only a moment ago, there was nothing but a round pool of water, slightly larger than the village had been.

The rippling surface reflected the sunlight in flickering glints.

A distinctive smell struck his nose.

A smell the boy had never smelled before in his life.

But the boy already knew what this thing he saw for the first time truly was.

The sea.

The calamity called the Abyss Opening.

He remembered. Grandfather had often told him stories like this. And how Father and Mother would grimace every time he did.

But.

To the boy, it had not been a disaster that happened in reality — it was more like something made-up, a story from another world.

It was supposed to be.

Without thinking, the boy walked forward. Toward the shore of the blue water.

If he got closer, surely this nightmare-like sea would disappear — and the village he knew, with everyone in it, would be there.

But even when he reached the shore where the sound of waves could be heard, the sea was still the sea.

He sank to his knees. He put both hands on the ground.

Lying flat at the water's edge, he peered into the sea.

Searching for the shape of his village in there. Seeking the faces of his family.

But all that lay within was plain, blue.

Tangled together in the seawater, countless tree trunks and branches of all sizes continued toward a bottomless abyss.

The seafloor was too deep to see through, deep, so deep.

No matter how hard he stared, there was nothing but water and the trees soaked in water —

— No.

Now.

Something moved.

Deep, deep in the dark, dark sea.

It.

Slowly.

Slowly floated up.

Straight. Aiming toward the boy.

Coming from within the dark, transparent sea.

Understanding what it was.

The boy screamed.

He woke up screaming.

What met him was attention and silence.

As the sound of hooves and wheels rang out, he received multiple incredulous stares.

"Ah — no —"

With his head still foggy, the young man raked his silver hair back and blurted out,

"I was dreaming —"

Those words, meant as an explanation, were met with an eruption of laughter.

"A dream!?" "Ooh, did you have a scary dream?" "No, no — being able to fall asleep in this situation makes him a big deal in a way."

The many laughs and jeers, however, didn't sink in to his still-unclear head; they flowed in one ear and out the other.

"Klaus. That's not helping."

Hearing his own name called with a sigh mixed in, the young man turned around.

Swaying in the carriage beside him was a familiar large red-haired man. Wearing layers upon layers of a deep crimson cloak that hung heavy, he looked this way with a face like carved rock.

Whether confused by the dream's lingering traces, the name he should have known couldn't come to him for a moment.

"...Rugnard..."

But the name he couldn't quite recall slipped out of his mouth on its own.

His head immediately cleared.

There were no clouds in the blue sky, and a bird was singing somewhere.

Scattered trees dotted the landscape here and there, casting patches of shade.

The breeze that passed through was pleasant.

The carriage carrying the group — more accurately, a freight wagon with improvised seating — rumbled along, its wheels clattering as it traveled through a mountain pass with no road to speak of.

It might have looked like a peaceful scene.

That is, if the five people in the carriage — besides the driver — hadn't been armed.

Klaus himself wore a black shirt under black leather light armor, gauntlets, and greaves, with a sword at his side. His companion Rugnard, hidden now under the cloak, had two hand-axes hanging from him.

The other three — the people he'd be working with on this job — were all dressed differently, but each was armored to some degree, with bows, swords, and other weapons within reach.

He didn't remember the names of those three — what were they? Klaus hadn't committed them to memory.

He figured it was a temporary acquaintance anyway, and hadn't paid much attention.

A town or village somewhere put out money for itinerant mercenaries to deal with troublemakers harassing the area. A perfectly common story.

Five mercenaries gathered in the nearby town of Boria had been asked to take care of a group of bandits, and were on their way to the hideout.

Bandit extermination was easy to say, but in any actual fight, both sides were risking their lives.

Despite that.

Apparently, he had fallen asleep on this carriage heading to such a violent scene.

It was understandable that he'd be mocked, but as it was, this wouldn't do.

In that case, the smart play was to say something meaningfully cryptic and cover his tracks!

Having reached that conclusion, Klaus swept back his silver hair, lowered his blue eyes slightly, and said,

"...Laugh if you want... but you know, sometimes when there's a bad smell about something, I end up like this..."

His fellow passengers, who didn't know Klaus well, looked puzzled at the incomprehensible line, but Rugnard alone made a sour face and said,

"...It's true that you sometimes fall asleep without regard for time or place..."

"Don't call out the falling asleep part, Uncle!"

Having his plan casually flipped on its head, whether from anger or embarrassment, Klaus's face turned red.

"That's not the point here! If you'd said something like 'Is that feeling coming over you again?' or whatever, that would've been cool!"

His voice, raised in a panic, was of course heard by everyone.

Rugnard's face grew even more sour.

"I've told you not to call me that in front of people.

And Klaus... that attitude is painful..."

"It is not!"

As the two argued, the other mercenaries regarded them with warm but weary eyes.

"Must be rough. Babysitting a kid."

One of them, a scruffy-bearded man holding a bow, said this to Rugnard. Hearing it, Klaus raked back his hair and started,

"Stop treating me like a —"

"Trying too hard to act grown up is a sickness specific to this age. Can't be helped."

Rugnard cut off his sentence.

"You called it a sickness!?"

Laughter erupted at Klaus's cry of dismay —

"Excuse me, but we're nearly there, so..."

A word from the driver who turned around instantly dispelled the loose atmosphere.

Everyone's expressions sharpened, and each reached for their weapon.

The carriage stopped.

"...It's just past the hill on the right."

The rise there, covered in shrubs and weeds, was too small to even call a small hill. It probably wouldn't take long to cross on foot.

The five mercenaries — Klaus and the others — stepped down from the carriage, exchanged nods, and began walking toward the hill.

Threading through the trees, being careful not to rustle the underbrush and make noise as they advanced, before long the party reached the summit.

"...No sign of lookouts. These guys must really think the world's a joke."

"Or else they have no self-awareness that they're the bad guys."

Klaus replied in a low voice to the murmur of a fellow mercenary nearby.

There was vegetation even on the flattened summit, but from the high ground, the surroundings could be surveyed. The group spread out and swept their eyes in all four directions —

"Found them. That's probably it."

After a moment, Rugnard's voice flowed out quietly.

Everyone gathered to that spot and followed his gaze, and there, in a neighboring mountain amid the trees, were two human figures.

Nearby there was a cleared area, with three or four campfire remnants. A short distance away, a dark hole in the hillside gaped open like a mouth.

There was no doubt it was the bandit's lair. But —

"There are more of them than I was told."

"More?"

Klaus frowned at Rugnard's murmur.

They'd been told there were five or six bandits. And the people Klaus could see were —

"...There are only two, aren't there?"

It didn't seem to be a contradiction.

But Rugnard's expression was grim.

"Those are the ones we can see.

But there are four campfire remnants. If the number of people is as we were told, one or two fires would be more than enough.

So in reality, we should assume there are more people than that."

"...I see."

When he put it that way it made sense, but for Klaus it was a little galling, like he'd lost a point for not noticing it himself.

"But then, what do we do?"

When the black-haired mercenary carrying two swords asked, the scruffy-bearded man with the bow said in a carefree tone,

"Hey, no need to overthink it. Let's just go in and get it done."

"Stop being reckless with that weapon you're planning to hang back with! You should know well enough that underestimating the enemy leads to trouble!"

The bald man carrying a sword complained.

It wasn't unusual for a desperate mercenary to sink to the level of a bandit.

Underestimate the enemy and write them off as lesser, and you might get beaten in return. On top of that, the enemy had the advantage of familiar terrain. There was no telling whether there were traps.

"Whether we proceed or not, we need to form a plan."

Rugnard said.

Klaus felt like he should say something too, and looked around —

Suddenly.

A chill crept up his spine.

He sensed something's smell faintly mixed into the lingering aroma of plants and trees.

What was that smell? Before he could even recall —

Thoom.

The impact that resonated in his stomach was somewhat similar to when a carriage bounces heavily.

That high-pitched sound — was it someone's scream? Or the creak of a fresh-cut tree?

In any case, in an instant.

The neighboring mountain where the bandits had been simply vanished, and in its place —

Spread out, deep and blue — water.

It looked like a lake.

But it wasn't.

If it were just an ordinary lake, the fishy smell of saltwater wouldn't be polluting the air.

What appeared in place of the mountain that had instantly subsided and crumbled away was, without any doubt —

"...Wh... the sea... you say...?"

The voice of the black-haired man who murmured this was trembling.

"You're joking... what, what do we do about this?"

"What do you mean, what do we do! We get out of a place like this as fast as we can!

Or else —"

The scruffy-bearded man who rebuked the stunned black-haired man's voice was also thick with fear.

"Or else they'll come!"

At those words, everyone fell silent for a moment.

"B... but this bounty money — how's that going to work?"

"We just say we killed the bandits before the sea appeared!"

While slowly, slowly retreating, the black-haired man still worrying about money, and the scruffy-bearded man still retreating but shouting at him.

"Anyway, let's go back!"

He spat the words out, and the scruffy-bearded man turned on his heel and bolted. That was the trigger — the bald man and the black-haired man followed behind not wanting to be left behind —

"Klaus!"

Called by name, Klaus finally came back to himself.

Tearing his gaze from the blue water surface that had seemed to pull him in, he looked at Rugnard standing beside him.

"We're going. Staying here any longer is pointless."

"...But... they...!"

The words that came out before he even meant to say them carried a hatred even he was surprised to hear in himself.

His heart rate rose. His head felt hot, his body hot, only his spine and the deepest part of his chest — cold.

Fear and rage were tangled up inside him, and his head wasn't working properly.

"Don't misread the time and enemy to fight. If we fight here now, it's certainly a pointless death."

At the warning, Klaus ground his back teeth together.

"...I know... I think I know..."

"Then, let's go."

Rugnard swirled his deep crimson cloak —

But Klaus's feet wouldn't move.

"Let's go!"

With a strong pull from behind on his shoulder from Rugnard, Klaus's feet finally moved.

Heading back the way they came, when Klaus glanced back over his shoulder —
In an instant.

In the blue, blue expanse of water, he thought he glimpsed several dark bluish-black shadows rising up.

"What do you mean you can't pay us!?"

With a bang! of a fist slamming the table, the scruffy-bearded man named Maddock roared, but the elderly mayor didn't flinch at all.

"But Mr. Maddock, the bandits were swallowed by the sea, weren't they?"

He said it with composure.

He was fifty or sixty years old. His hair had gone thin and white, but his back was straight as a rod, and his eyes had a sharp, guarded light.

After the bandits' mountain was swallowed by the sea, the party returned to the town of Boria where they had accepted the request, going directly to the mayor's house.

In a rather drab reception room, they gave an explanation of the situation — with some embellishment — but —

The answer that came back from the mayor was that he could not pay the success bonus.

"That's why — I'm telling you I killed those guys before the sea appeared!"

No matter how much Maddock sputtered and shouted, the old man wore a composed expression.

"Even so, you came back far too quickly — that's what I'm told by Mito — my son."

The person standing behind the mayor, near the faded wall tapestry, was the carriage driver who had transported the group to the site.

In reality, the sea had appeared before they had even reached the bandits' hideout, and they had immediately turned back. The lie that the sea appeared after they had already killed them was, no matter how you thought about it, impossible given the time.

"I don't care! I'm saying I did it, so I did it!"

But the man himself either hadn't noticed the contradiction, or was simply past caring — his face flushed red as he continued to bark.

In contrast, the mayor was annoyingly calm.

"I see.

Then, would you mind telling me in detail how you defeated the bandits?

To begin with, I had asked that if you subdued the enemy, you bring back evidence.

To ask me to believe 'the sea appeared after we defeated them' with no evidence, and pay up...

If you used a sword, there would be blood staining the blade — if you could show me that as well."

"...Tch! If you want to see a bloodstained blade so badly —!"

Maddock reached for the short knife at his hip —

"Stop."

The one who stopped the man's movement was Klaus's voice, which he couldn't help but raise.

"...What did you say...?"

Maddock turned his neck around to look at Klaus, his eyes bloodshot.

Honestly it was a little scary, but Klaus played it cool, raking back his silver hair.

"I said stop."

"You taking the old man's side, kid!?"

Without missing a beat at his shout,

"There's no need for you alone to take a loss — that's what I mean to say."

Rugnard interjected from the side.

"...I alone take a loss...? What are you talking about!?"

Maddock frowned, and Rugnard calmly crossed his arms.

"That mayor there — from what I can see, he's not someone who'll hand over money just from a bit of threatening.

If you were to accidentally injure him, you'd become a wanted man.

No, with the mayor, he might just ask everyone present to take you down at that point.

I don't know how skilled you are, but four against one is no walk in the park."

"...Tch...!"

That hadn't been in Maddock's calculations, apparently — his complexion finally changed.

"Even if you could beat all of them in return, it gains you nothing.

So, however this turns out, you alone stand to lose.

Personally, I'd be fine profiting from that, but it seems Klaus doesn't like that sort of thing.

Would you step down for the sake of the child's inexperience?"

"I'm not a child."

Klaus put in the objection as a matter of obligation.

"Mayor."

Without waiting for Maddock's answer, Rugnard turned to the mayor.

"But surely you won't tell us to return even the advance we already received.

We had expenses in preparing for this request, and thanks to your request, we were nearly swallowed by the sea ourselves."

He said it in a joking tone, and the mayor smiled wryly too.

"...To ask that would indeed be unreasonable."

"Then, that's that — shall we say?"

Rugnard looked over and asked the question, and Maddock simply spat "Tch" and looked away.

Lying flat on his back on a rough straw bed, staring at the sooty ceiling boards,

"...This doesn't sit right with me..."

Klaus murmured quietly.

"Is that about this room?"

Rugnard said, looking around.

From the ceiling hung a commonly seen type of lamp. Translucent containers made from the thin skin of Nakua fruits glued together were filled with fresh water, and a magical element soaking inside emitted a bluish-white glow to illuminate the surroundings.

A musty smell seeped from the grimy walls, and the bed — if you could call a pile of straw covered with a scrap of cloth a bed — offered nothing that could in good conscience be called comfort.

The mayor had called it an outbuilding, but it seemed more like a stable or storage shed.

It didn't feel like a warm welcome, but the way the world generally treated mercenaries was roughly like this.

The rooms prepared for the other three mercenaries were probably similar.

After the "discussion" with the mayor had ended. Whether out of goodwill or merely to smooth things over, all the mercenaries were treated to a fairly lavish dinner.

After that, they had been shown to this shack that the mayor called an outbuilding.

To Rugnard's question, Klaus made an expression full of dissatisfaction.

"It's not about the room.

During the discussion with the mayor, the scruffy-bearded guy was making a fuss at the mayor."

"The scruffy-bearded guy? Ah, you mean Maddock."

"Was that his name? Anyway, when that guy was about to pull out something dangerous, I stopped him."

"You stopped him."

Said easily, and Klaus sat up on the bed.

"No! Not 'you stopped him!'"

"I'm not sure what you mean. What are you saying?"

"So...!"

He started to explain, then Klaus trailed off.

It would be far too embarrassing to actually say that out loud.

".....It's nothing..."

"Is that so. Nothing."

Rugnard sat heavily on his own bed, crossed his arms,

"I thought you were unsatisfied because I cut in and talked him down, making you feel like your moment had been stolen."

"You knew it all along!"

He jumped to his feet without thinking.

But Rugnard smiled wryly.

"Don't be so angry.

In that situation, even if you had said the same thing I said, Maddock wouldn't have backed down."

"...Why not..."

He didn't feel confident he could have talked the man down either, but he asked anyway.

"He seemed to be looking down on you for being young. If you had talked him down, he might have gotten even more furious.

I was the only one who could settle that situation, is all."

The logic made sense in a way, and not in another.

"Whether you're older or younger... shouldn't matter."

"It doesn't. Not to the essence of things.

But whether the words land the same way, depending on who speaks them —"

The reason Rugnard stopped his words there was something Klaus understood too.

Right now.

"...You heard a voice, right?"

"Yes."

They exchanged words and listened carefully, and mixed in with the night wind was the sound of a man's raised voice.

They couldn't make out exactly what was being said, but the resonance within it was anything but ordinary.

They exchanged glances and nodded, and knew as soon as they rushed outside.

The voice was coming from the main house.

Was this voice... the voice of Mito, the mayor's son?

Carrying a certain premonition, under the moon looking down from above, dashing through the night wind.

A small back door of the main house was slightly open, with lamplight spilling from it.

They pulled the door open and rushed in, and the familiar smell that mercenaries like Klaus were well accustomed to struck their noses.

"Dad! Dad, dad, come on, dad!"

Heading toward where the voice came from, there were two women — whether family or servants — clinging to each other and trembling. Beside them was a room with its door left open.

Inside.

A mayor drenched in blood, no longer moving.

And a son, Mito, clinging to him and screaming —

Under the light of the lamp, the red-stained carpet glistened slickly.

The lukewarm smell of blood.

"What happened?"

At Rugnard's question, Mito gave a small flinch, then turned eyes gleaming with tears and anger.

"Damn it! That bastard... Dad...! You guys'... damn it...!"

But whether confused by his own rage, what followed wasn't quite an explanation.

"— What happened —!"

The two mercenaries who arrived late — the black-haired man and the bald man — looked into the room and were speechless.

What on earth had happened?

Considering the one person who had yet to be accounted for, the imagination came easily enough —

"Slowly. Tell us."

Rugnard spoke again, and Mito, his lips trembling,

"He... your teammate...! That Madd... Maddock guy...! Father...! Father...!"

In a muffled voice, he spat out the words that were exactly as expected —

A heavy and painful silence hung in the room.

Mito slumped into a chair, completely dazed.

They were now in Mito's room, not the mayor's.

Afterward, Rugnard had managed the situation — sometimes scolding, sometimes soothing a confused Mito — confirming the situation and handling the immediate basics.

What had been established: Maddock had probably killed the mayor out of a grudge over the payment.

And that some money had been taken — along with a horse stolen from the stable.

He had likely left town on horseback. If they asked around, they could get a rough idea of which direction he had headed, but they hadn't gotten that far yet.

They covered the body with cloth, moved to Mito's room to let things settle —

"...Kill him..."

The murmur that broke the heavy silence — it was clear whose it was.

Mito, his expression blank, moved only his mouth.

"...Kill Maddock... avenge my father... please... I'm begging you..."

"I'll... pay... so please..."

No answer — however, came from anyone.

"...I'm begging you... I mean it..."

"If you mean it —"

Rugnard reluctantly opened his mouth.

"File a report with the authorities, follow the proper procedure, and put a bounty on him.

It might sound cold, but practically speaking, four of us is nowhere near enough to search for a man when we don't even know where he's fled."

"...Then... then..."

If I do that... can I be absolutely sure... I'll get revenge for my father...?"

Of course —

There was no one there who could answer that question —

That was the place that had once been the sea.

After leaving the town of Boria. On the way to the next town, looking for the next job.

It was Klaus who had suggested they go see that sea.

The sea that had swallowed the bandits' mountain right before everyone's eyes.

— Of all the calamities in existence, which is the most horrifying?

If one were to ask that of the people, many would answer.

The sea, they would say.

Without any warning whatsoever, the ground suddenly sinks, swallowing everything above it, leaving behind nothing but blue seawater stretching wide — the sea.

To distinguish it from the great ocean at the edge of the world, people called it the Abyss Opening.

The reason people loathed the Abyss Opening was not only its sudden nature, but that alone was disaster enough when it appeared in a place where people lived.

Standing at the water's edge, Klaus gazed for a while at the expanse of blue.

"...If only something like this hadn't appeared, the mayor wouldn't have been killed either..."

The murmur that came out was unmistakably hoarse, even to himself.

He wasn't feeling sympathy for the mayor.

He could feel hatred and anger swirling inside him.

Religious people said: The Abyss Opening is caused by the curse of an evil god sealed away by the gods in the distant past.

Pragmatists said: The Abyss Opening is simply a natural phenomenon.

Which was correct was of course unknown, but regardless, it was not something human power could do anything about.

And yet —

Klaus hated the sea.

This sea had appeared here only yesterday.

On the surrounding trees, one could see here and there the marks of branches and leaves having been stripped by sharp blades, and dried traces of something slimy that had brushed against them.

It was proof that things which had emerged from the sea had roamed about and returned.

Coming closer to the water's edge and looking in, white branches already stretched like a net densely inside the water, blocking the path to the depths.

With time, this place too would eventually be completely purified and used as a water source for daily life.

"— Klaus —"

"I know. You're going to say it's just sentimentality."

At Rugnard's call, Klaus sighed and turned on his heel.

And time passed for a while.

He killed an acquaintance today.

He didn't feel bad about it. The man was a piece of garbage who had a familiar face but couldn't be called a friend or comrade, and besides, it was the other side who had started it.

"...This is the worst. Damn it..."

Dragging his weary body, walking through a back alley of the town, Maddock Lambert unknowingly let out a small groan.

Not quite a slum, but too rundown to call a lower district — that kind of area.

There was still some time before dusk, but the sunlight was poor and it was dim.

He was somewhat splattered with blood from a fight, but it was on clothes that looked like dirty rags to begin with. In the dimness, you couldn't tell if it was blood or mud stains. And even if it were noticed as blood, there probably weren't any well-behaved folk in a place like this who would raise a fuss about it.

In fact, the people slumped by the roadside here showed no sign of moving an eyebrow even as Maddock's figure was reflected in their eyes.

Even so, it had been smarter to get out of this town quickly.

"...Why does it have to be like this... damn it..."

Spitting curses, he kept walking. He had picked up a few scratches, and that slight pain irritated him annoyingly.

Of course.

It all started with that one thing.

About a month ago, wasn't it.

In a miserable town, he had taken a miserable job from a miserable old man, and the sea had made that job fall through.

The miserable old man had started saying he couldn't pay — he had let it go for the moment, but then got angry about it again and went back to negotiate with the old man, and then an argument broke out over the man's infuriatingly irritating manner of speaking, and before he knew it —

He had killed him.

It was entirely that old man's fault. If he'd just paid properly without all that whining.

That old man — what was his name. He couldn't even remember anymore.

He found out today that a bounty had been put on his head for that.

He had run into a mercenary at the town tavern — someone he'd once worked a job with.

A person who was barely an acquaintance, yet for some reason strangely familiar.

Even bought him a drink.

He figured, well why not, and then when they left the tavern, one of the man's companions was waiting outside.

Before he knew it, the string on the bow he carried had been cut.

The acquaintance wore a smug, composed expression and rattled on and on about various things.

He found out that the miserable old man's miserable son had put a bounty on his head.

He'd heard enough.

He killed the idiot who believed his only weapon was the bow and had let his guard down with a stupid look on his face, and with some effort also killed the other companion.

He had managed to get through it, but —

This had become a troublesome situation.

A wanted likeness would probably be circulating, but by slightly changing his hairstyle and clothes and using a fake name, that sort of thing could be managed.

However, that only worked if the person didn't already know him directly.

A man who had once worked a job with him, wanting a bit of money, coming after him — the sort of thing that happened today could happen again.

Even if he managed to beat every single one of them in return, if he stirred up trouble in town, the authorities would inevitably start moving no matter what.

However this played out, it was nothing but trouble.

Worst really was the right word.

Anyway, for now, getting out of this town as soon as possible was the priority. It would be impossible to reach another village or town before dusk, so it would be camping out, but that couldn't be helped.

Holding the bow with its cut string in his left hand out of vague reluctance, Maddock walked — and stopped.

Blocking the path ahead stood three figures enveloped from head to toe in black robes and hoods.

In this season, the nights grew cold. Cloaks and hoods for warmth weren't particularly unusual.

Even among the people slumped by the roadside, there were some wearing grimy robes. But.

Standing in his way naturally meant some kind of intent.

The one at the front seemed strangely small, but — whatever.

"You're in the way."

Maddock said flatly.

It was hard to imagine that another group of bounty hunters had appeared at a moment like this, but —

Kuk, the figure at the front let out a small laugh.

"I've seen your skills."

What resonated was a clear, young woman's voice — unsuited to this grimy back alley. So she had been watching when Maddock had dispatched those two.

The figure didn't look like the law, nor like some do-gooder who'd come to capture Maddock out of a sense of justice, but that was no reason to let his guard down.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He didn't expect this kind of bluff to work, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Under the deeply lowered hood, the woman moved her crimson lips into a small smile.

"Oh? Perhaps it's my misunderstanding? I was thinking that if you were a skilled person, I'd very much like to hire you as a bodyguard."

"A job, you say?"

"Yes. We have a carriage prepared, so if you agree, I was thinking we could set out today.

And this is just a small advance."

The front of the woman's robe opened slightly, and what was extended was a black-gloved hand. In the fingers she held, a small leather pouch.

Maddock approached warily, and with his left hand, snatched the pouch the woman offered.

He stepped back to put distance between them, and peeked inside to find a few gold coins. A rather generous offer.

Of course Maddock also had the option of taking the money and running. But the other side would have anticipated that.

If they could casually toss this amount as bait that might not even catch anything, their goal was at minimum not the small change on Maddock's bounty.

There was naturally some angle to this, but getting money and a carriage as a means of transport was a huge help for Maddock at the moment.

For now —

"...I suppose I'll hear what you have to say."

"Good. I'm glad."

The woman slowly walked toward Maddock and stopped a short distance away, then looked up.

Maddock barely stopped himself from letting out a whistle.

Skin so clear it seemed transparent. Eyes the deep color of the sky. Pale golden bangs.

The first thing that surfaced from Maddock's not particularly refined vocabulary was the expression a prime catch, but —

If their meeting had been in a different form, he would have immediately pulled her into a dark alley.

"Call me Lowell, if you would."

"I'm Ma—"

He almost blurted out Maddock and barely caught himself.

"...Max.

By the way, this bodyguard job — where are we going?"

"Yes."

Lowell leaned softly toward Maddock,

"To see the sea."

She whispered that with a full smile on her face.

The seedy tavern was filled with vulgar noise.

The smell of alcohol, tobacco, and oil.

Bragging stories — half-believed at best — were rattled off at full volume. Occasional bursts of crude laughter.

Someone unaccustomed to such places might see it as somewhere a dangerous incident could happen at any moment, but a tavern had its own kind of order. If you read the atmosphere properly, there was no real need to be afraid.

In fact, among the customers, there were young women and elderly people who didn't look physically capable at all — yet they'd enjoy their drinks normally and leave normally.

In a corner near the entrance of such an establishment, two people sat.

On a worn table, two cups — not containing alcohol, but water.

Plus a small dish of crackers.

"Grim state of affairs."

Opposite the disgruntled Rugnard, Klaus wore a small smile and raked back his hair.

"Complaining doesn't change anything."

"Posturing doesn't either, though."

Instantly deflected.

"...Well, that's true..."

The smile he'd been maintaining twitched.

"If both amount to the same thing, at least posturing is better, right?"

"True, it doesn't matter either way. Do as you like."

Both their stomachs gave a small growl.

Eating the crackers on the table would stave off hunger for a moment, but not for long at this amount.

Itinerant mercenaries saw work come in when the world was troubled, but when there was nothing happening, there was no income.

About a month ago, a bandit extermination job they had accepted in another town had fallen through.

After that, there had been two guard jobs for freight wagons — but with these kinds of jobs, meals and a place to sleep were included, but in exchange there was little profit. In normal circumstances, if bandits attacked on the road and you repelled them, it was common to receive a decent bonus as thanks, but as it turned out, nothing happened along the way. They received only a meager reward — a sum where the word token sounded not even remotely humble.

On top of that, for the past five days they hadn't even found such escort work, and had ended up in this town of Fyuper.

They were here in this tavern — the kind of place where mercenaries, drifters, and all kinds of folk gathered — watching their water and crackers in hopes that some lucrative business might fall into their laps.

For a while after sitting down.

They were listening carefully to the conversations of other customers, searching for anything that might lead to profit, but so far nothing of the sort had reached their ears. Circulating among the various tables, and if necessary buying someone a drink, actively drawing out information — all of that was sometimes necessary, but there was no guarantee that would lead to a job.

Drinking water while pretending to be drunk in order to buy drinks for others, and then finding no work anyway — that would simply be too sad.

When they thought about it that way, even beginning to actively gather information felt hard to start.

And yet, just sitting and waiting like this, a lucrative opportunity would almost certainly not simply fall into their laps.

Thinking all these various thoughts, both of them were getting a little tired of watching their water and crackers, when —

The door to the nearby tavern creaked open.

In walked a man, alone. Wearing a protective robe, with a somewhat gloomy face.

At that moment.

Klaus and Rugnard — and the man — all froze.

The man hurriedly turned on his heel —

"— Maddock!"

Klaus couldn't help but call the man's name and stood up.

The man was wearing a brand-new robe and his stubble was gone and clean-shaved, but there was no mistake.

The man, seeing the two of them, clicked his tongue and bolted out of the tavern. That alone was proof enough.

Both Klaus and Rugnard knew that Maddock had a bounty on his head. It wasn't a high sum by any means, but it was a source of income.

"A lucrative deal just walked in on its own!"

Klaus shouted and grabbed the weapon he'd leaned against the wall, then bolted after Maddock.

From behind, Rugnard was calling Klaus's name for some reason, but there was no time for idle chatter.

Through the door was the night.

Street lamps were few and far between, but many houses let lamplight spill from windows, and it was still far from true darkness.

Additionally, the moon and stars in the sky lit up Maddock's retreating figure.

Klaus kicked off the ground to pursue that back!

Maddock turned left down the street ahead. By the time Klaus reached it, his figure had already disappeared.

He plunged into the street regardless. The other man had probably turned at the corner ahead. If he lost him here it would be hard to find him again.

He reached a fork in the road and looked left and right. But there was no sign of anyone — instead, breath and footsteps came from behind. Without even having to turn around, he knew it was Rugnard.

"Left or right, he had to go one way! I'll go this way —"

"Hey."

Thwack. A light kick to the back. He stumbled forward and turned around.

"This is no time to be playing around —"

His words of protest stopped midway.

In front of him was Rugnard, carrying both their bags. And —

"Don't recklessly call out the target's name. Otherwise —"

Rugnard made a disgruntled face and pointed behind himself. There.

"You were calling him Maddock earlier, right. That man's name."

Standing with an easygoing smile was a woman he didn't know.

She looked a bit younger than Klaus. More of a girl than a woman. Black hair, and gloves that covered everything from her fingertips to her shoulders. From her light armor and the hefty weapon in her hand, it was clear she was in the same profession.

Come to think of it, she seemed to have been in that tavern earlier.

"If that's the wanted man who caused trouble in the neighboring town yesterday, I'll help you corner him. Split the reward fifty-fifty."

Help you, she said. And there it was.

Rugnard made a sour face.

"...And otherwise, an extra like this comes along."

An ultimate dilemma.

He wanted to say don't be ridiculous, but if they argued it would certainly mean losing Maddock.

If he said yes to that, then even if things went well, he'd have agreed to the terms and half the money would be taken.

Klaus looked to Rugnard for advice —

And his expression stiffened.

It was the same sensation as the one he'd encountered about a month before.

A sudden chill up his spine.

Sensing something's smell secretly mingled in the mixed smells of the town.

There was no need to bother recalling what smell that was.

"...This is...!"

The one who voiced it was not Klaus but the black-haired girl.

The next instant.

Thoom.

The world gave one large tremor.

Several.

The sounds of creaking and something crumbling — and water.

A raw smell mixed into the wind.

What reached them were distant screams.

There was no more doubt.

Driven by fear and anger and hatred — some dark impulse — Klaus turned on his heel and kicked the ground.

Aiming for the source of the sound, the commotion.

In the corner of his vision, a shadow running alongside him belonged to the girl. Despite the massive weapon she carried, she was fast. She seemed to be heading to the same place as Klaus, but — did she really understand the situation?

"Hey you!"

"Don't call me 'you'!"

Replied without even turning around.

"I don't know your name!"

"Arisa!"

"Whatever! Do you understand what's happening!?"

"I understand!"

She glanced at Klaus for just a moment, then looked forward again, and the girl — Arisa — said:

"The sea appeared, right?"

Simply like that.

Klaus was struck speechless.

Right. She was correct.

The Abyss Opening had appeared.

In this town.

Knowing that, she was still heading straight toward it without hesitation.

In the case of a Abyss Opening appearing near a town or village, it was customary for mercenaries who helped with the aftermath to be paid a reward. In a certain sense it was more reliable than searching for Maddock when you weren't even sure you could catch up to him.

But that was only if the aftermath cleanup went smoothly.

In the middle of a situation where some mercenaries hung back due to the risk versus reward calculation, heading there without hesitation was not exactly normal behavior. — Of course, Klaus wasn't one to talk.

Just thinking about what lay ahead, various emotions swirled into a lump that boiled his heart hot, making it impossible to stay still.

"Don't die on me!"

Running alongside her, Klaus said, and Arisa turned with a bold grin.

"Same to you!"

"Don't say 'same to you'!"

"I don't know your name either!"

"It's Klaus!"

At this moment.

Klaus had completely forgotten.

"Running ahead recklessly without thinking — not that they'd listen to me."

Having no choice but to chase after them while carrying their bags, Ragnard.

Blood on the wind.

Death on the wind.

The smell of the sea on the wind.

The moon shining brightly overhead, a black sticky wind in the night.

The night was still young, with many still awake.

The lamplight spilling from the windows of houses spoke of human life.

And that —

Abruptly cut off and went dark somewhere ahead.

What lay ahead was drifting blackness.

Moonlight, starlight, and the glow of town lanterns. Reflecting those faint lights and flickering, the darkness-colored expanse continuing into unfathomable depths — water.

This was no reservoir.

The raw saltwater smell mixed in the wind told the tale. Told of the tragedy in this place.

This was the sea.

— Abyss Opening.

The reason people loathed it was not only because it swallowed everything without a single shred of mercy.

What was truly to be feared was what came next.

Rising like bubbles from the bottomless dark depths — things.

Right now —

Trampling all over the people.

A lamp flame flickered small.

Part of its foundation swallowed by the sea, in a crumbling house, wet and glistening in the wavering light — blue-black.

Looking through the rooms for any survivors.

With every step, the sound was not of shoes, but of something sticky slapping against the floor.

These were not rescuers. Ten? Twenty? Perhaps more. The shadows wandering the shoreline were in a human shape but were not human.

A blue-black hand.

Gripping a screaming child by the head and dragging it toward the edge of the Abyss Opening.

The hand, slimy and wrinkled like a scab, had mottled dead-leaf-colored markings clinging to it.

A man cried out and raised a chair, about to swing it at the shadow carrying the child away —

The man's body gave a small jolt.

A blade tip protruded from his back.

The man crumpled. The chair clattered. The child's crying grew louder — water sounds. And then the child's voice stopped.

Screams and angry shouts and crying. Voices praying to gods, voices cursing gods, voices begging for help.

— Death throes.

They were malice.

They were things incompatible with humanity.

The aberrations that rose like bubbles from the abyss along with the appearance of the Abyss Opening.

Their entire bodies soaked in seawater, glistening — their mouths hanging wide open left and right. Clouded eyes like those of a drowned corpse moving left and right, searching for victims.

Wet black hair and tangled seaweed clung to their heads, unswayed even by the wind.

Wrapped in the garments of strange algae, holding crooked coral swords, their form was the very mockery of humanity.

They came wrapped in seawater, and either dragged the nearby humans into the Abyss Opening, or killed them and moved on.

The things that come from the abyss. Servants of the cursed evil god.

The aberrations — neither fully human nor fully fish — processed the terrified, trembling people with their clouded eyes, dispassionately.

But.

Humanity was by no means powerless and passive.

"— Just doing whatever they please —"

Pushing through the fleeing crowd, Klaus charged at the nearest aberration!

"— They've done enough!"

In his right hand, a bare blade of silver. His words rang with unwavering fighting spirit.

Lowering himself and rushing in, he sent a horizontal slash at one of the things that came from the abyss!

The aberration instinctively tried to parry with its coral sword —

But Klaus's speed didn't allow it. Easily slipping past the blade the enemy raised in defense, he shaved past the aberration's torso, and without stopping his flow, closed the distance to the next one!

The smell of the wind intensified. Was it the blood smell of aberrations? Or the sea scent from the deep abyss?

The second aberration's blade barely managed to catch Klaus's sword. A hard, sharp sound rang out.

But Klaus didn't stop. At the very moment his long sword strike was blocked, his left hand had already left the hilt — drawing the shorter blade at his hip, he thrust it between the ribs of the aberration that had stopped his sword!

That made two.

Blood of aberrations sprayed from the drawn blade. Glinting in the moonlight, it was red.

Faster than the spray hit the ground. The swordsman dashed toward the next target! Stirring up the stagnant night wind, cleaving the moonlight. Klaus's blade danced through the night.

But the aberrations had their own intelligence.

Uwoooooooooooooooooooooon.

The distant howl — was it their language? Recognizing a formidable opponent, some of the things from the abyss who had scattered here and there on their hunt for humans began moving toward Klaus.

Some drew him out, some used the shadows to circle around.

The aberrations' encirclement was nearly complete —

And then one flank collapsed.

"Ha!"

Transparent voice ringing through the night. Striking the back of the aberrations' encirclement and cutting in was none other than Arisa!

But — what was that strange weapon she carried?

Its length was about her own height.

The wide single-edged blade had a back where countless small protrusions grew like teeth.

Too long-handled to call a sword, too long-bladed and short-handled to call a spear or glaive.

Then perhaps this should be called a spear-blade.

The aberrations struck from behind had their lines briefly disrupted, but quickly regained their composure and turned to face Arisa —

And there Arisa launched an attack! Aiming for the aberration's torso, swinging the large blade horizontal!

Klaus caught a glimpse of this in the corner of his vision —

And sensed Arisa's defeat.

Her slender arms showed clear lack of power. A strike with a heavy weapon might possibly overpower the first aberration's defense and take it down — but

She wouldn't go beyond two with that power and speed.

Before she could bring the heavy blade around for the next blow.

She would be surrounded.

Become prey for blades from all four sides.

The aberrations probably thought the same thing. They approached Arisa without caution —

But.

Pop, with a small sound.

A small sound from the corner of Arisa's mouth.

Followed by:

"Black ones, one, two, three — explode!"

At the command, three of the teeth growing from the blade's back exploded!

The explosion accelerated the blade, and borrowing that momentum, Arisa used her whole body to forcibly swing the long handle around!

Weight combined with explosion and rotation. That piled enormous force onto a blade that should have been powerless!

The blade that the aberrations had raised in defense was easily deflected, the torso severed clean sideways, and without losing that momentum, within the circle her blade's tip described, she swept through the other aberrations that had stepped in! Furthermore, using the remaining rotational force, she dragged the weapon along and slipped out of the encirclement, then dashed toward Klaus's side and stopped.

"— A divine spell?"

Standing shoulder to shoulder facing the aberrations with blades raised, Klaus murmured to Arisa.

A divine spell.

It was the miraculous power bestowed by the gods so that humanity could counter the aberrations.

By taking a substance called magical elements into one's body — to put it plainly, eating it — various phenomena could be triggered.

Using it required aptitude, and what determined the presence or absence of this aptitude was unclear, but those who had it were said to number about one in four or five people.

That just now was simply causing the magical elements attached to the spear-blade's back to burst, converting them into propulsive force — but depending on how it was used, it was possible to control various phenomena.

"More or less."

Arisa said with a small smile.

"You — wait, Klaus, you're pretty capable. But you push too far forward."

"Mind your own business."

He said it back and looked at the girl beside him afresh.

Standing side by side, she was a head shorter. Average height for a woman, but a slight build for a fighter.

"That's fine for me. Pushing a little too far forward."

Around those two, the things from the abyss were once again completing their encirclement.

"Good grief."

Rugnard tossed the bags he was carrying haphazardly into a shadow nearby.

"Looking after the younger generation has always been the adults' job —"

Muttering, he removed from a holder on his armor a container about the size of a harmonica with his left hand.

"— but it would be nice if they could at least think of the trouble they're causing."

Sliding the long side open revealed a row of white granules inside.

In size, color, and shape, they resembled shed beast fangs.

They were the same as what had been embedded in the back of Arisa's spear-blade — magical elements.

He brought them to his mouth, picked up two or three with his lips, slid the container back into the holster with his left hand, and began tracing seals in the empty air with the fingers of his extended right hand.

Pop, with a dry sound, the bitten magical elements crumbled. The fragments melted away in Rugnard's mouth in an instant. An unremarkable aftertaste, with a sensation of power slowly seeping down his throat and into his stomach.

— Fragments of the world, edge of the seal — — Through this vessel, by the might of the divine trees —

What Rugnard's mouth weaved was a prayer to the gods.

In the sense of divine spell, it was the same as what Arisa had used just now.

But a divine spell of the level she had used — anyone with aptitude could learn to do it if taught and with practice.

However, to transform that power using arrays, sigils, and incantations into a different shape, and wield it at a level that could be called art — that required additional aptitude, skill, and knowledge.

One who possessed all of those, wielding various divine spells —

People called such a person a divine-spell wielder.

Rugnard's rough fingertips delicately stroked the empty air, which rippled visibly like a water surface on a windy day, etching wave patterns.

— Toward those not permitted to be on this land, direct the punishing curse —

He spread his left and right hands wide.

Fluttering and spreading — his many layered deep crimson cloaks.

On each layer, front and back, countless sigils were drawn covering every inch, with magical elements embedded at key points.

Responding to Rugnard's incantation, some of the magical elements embedded in the cloak flashed brilliantly and evaporated, and light ran through the connecting sigils.

The light sigils overlapped with the wave patterns etched in the air, completing a complex seal.

"Eyes without number opening in a moonless night sky —"

Rugnard's voice resonated.

The things from the abyss who had encircled Klaus and Arisa moved — at exactly that moment.

The change occurred.

— Igiiiiii!?

One of the things from the abyss cried out.

Even to Klaus and Arisa who couldn't understand the language of aberrations, it was clearly a shriek of astonishment.

On the chests, on the stomachs. On arms, legs, and cheeks. Suddenly appearing and opening on the encircling things from the abyss were many eyes, each about the size of a palm.

"— What is this —"

The murmuring voice was Arisa's.

And then.

Rustle.

Along with a sound like rustling leaves, in an instant, something stretching from the opened eyes enveloped the bodies of the things from the abyss in a net-like cover!

If one could have observed carefully, one would have seen that slender, toothpick-like tree branches, repeatedly branching and spreading, were binding the aberrations' bodies.

Klaus knew. What that was exactly.

A support divine spell that Rugnard had used for them.

He had once heard: these countless eyes and branches appear responding to the thin layer of seawater the things from the abyss are clad in, temporarily sealing their movements.

The movements of the entangled things from the abyss stopped.

"I don't care about the details, it's our chance! Let's go!"

Klaus roared and kicked off the ground, charging at the aberrations who could no longer move.

"G-got it!"

Taking it as an opportunity regardless, Arisa followed.

But.

Defeating the aberrations here did not decide the battle.

Even as the fighting continued, at the distant Abyss Opening, one more, and yet another — aberrations kept crawling up from the sea onto land one after another.

— By around this time, at last.

Other mercenaries, or perhaps the town's guard soldiers, must have joined the fight — from various places in the night, the sounds of clashing blades began to ring out.

Amid screams and angry shouts, the sounds of battle heard from somewhere.

Among those fleeing in confusion in every direction.

Running through it all —

Worst. Damn this.

Maddock felt that inside his chest.

He'd been hired by that incomprehensible girl called Lowell, with her nonsensical talk.

He had gotten into the carriage the girl had, and came as far as this town.

Taking a room and waiting until night, Lowell had gone out with her companions.

Apparently: I'm going to take care of some business, so please be a good boy and wait.

Still completely incomprehensible.

Simply waiting around idly, wanting a drink, he had made his way to the tavern in the inn — but the inn Lowell had taken was an upscale place unaccustomed to Maddock.

The tavern in such an establishment was naturally of a similar caliber.

He had the advance money so there was no shortage of funds, but the refined patrons and refined décor were simply not to Maddock's taste.

He'd drifted out of the inn to find a place more to his liking, found somewhere that looked comfortable and walked through the door —

And saw a familiar face.

Someone he'd encountered in the earlier job that had gone wrong — he thought the names were Rugnard and Klaus.

He'd fled in a hurry, and then this commotion erupted.

Any idiot knew what had happened.

The sea had appeared. In this very town, of all places.

Thanks to that, it seemed the two familiar faces had given up the pursuit — but that didn't make him feel like thanking the heavens.

If Lowell got scared about the sea and left him behind, both the money source and the convenient means of transport would be gone.

He wanted to meet up as fast as possible and leave this town behind, but after bolting from the tavern, in the middle of all this chaos, he had a poor sense of where he was now.

He was still heading roughly in the direction where the inn should be, making his best guess.

If only I'd stayed quietly at the inn, or are Lowell's group even safe, and various other thoughts floated through his mind, but there was no point in thinking about them.

Making his way, the crowd thinned eventually, and Maddock stopped at the approach to a small crossroad.

At the corner of the crossroad, several looming figures — roughly ten by a quick count. All in robes and hoods, standing still as if having an informal chat, neither fleeing nor doing anything else.

One among them was a slightly small figure.

Maddock recognized the white face peeking from under the hood.

She still looked like a teenager. He had also seen her with the hood down once, and had well-kept golden hair.

— Lowell? Here of all places —?

He didn't know what she was doing, but the relief of finding a familiar face made him move at a trot to call out to her —

And he noticed.

Barely a short distance from where Lowell's group stood, tucked in the shadow of a building at the crossroad — out of reach of the street lamp — several aberrations standing with their crooked swords hanging at their sides.

"Fish-guys!?"

The voice he raised without thinking — both Lowell's group and the things from the abyss became aware of Maddock.

Ruaaaaaaaaaa!

Letting out a voice no human could possibly pronounce, the things from the abyss raised their swords toward Maddock, and Maddock too —

"Wait. They're allies."

Whether toward Maddock, or toward the robed figures — the voice was Lowell's.

The tone, completely lacking urgency, grated on Maddock's nerves. She probably couldn't see the fish creatures from where she stood, but even so, this was far too careless.

Whether to run and abandon her, or fight.

That two-choice dilemma had floated into his mind, but at that moment.

The things from the abyss dropped their fighting stances.

— What...!?

The core of Maddock's mind froze.

The things from the abyss — what should have been humanity's natural enemies — lost all further interest in Maddock or Lowell's group, let their crooked swords hang, and simply stood there in their original spot.

Could it be —

A certain possibility floated into Maddock's mind.

Lowell's words, they're allies —

Not to him, not to the robed figures.

Could they have been directed at the things from the abyss —!?

Still keeping a wary eye on the standing things from the abyss, Maddock drew closer to Lowell's group.

She gave him a reproachful look and said,

"Why are you in a place like this? I asked you to wait at the inn."

But he had no capacity to deal with irrelevant scolding. His eyes still on the aberration group standing at a distance, Maddock asked,

"The sea... the Abyss Opening appeared... these things... why...?"

"I know."

To his confused state, Lowell turned a teasing smile.

"That's why I told you from the beginning.

We are going to see the sea —"

A trembling distant howl.

The sounds of clashing blades that had been rising here and there throughout the town — stopped for an instant.

"— Is it time —!?"

Klaus stopped and muttered.

The behavior of the things from the abyss scattered throughout the town changed.

From offense to retreat.

Like ants returning to their nest, they withdrew toward the Abyss Opening they had crawled out from, one after another entering the water.

It was ending.

The sea's time.

The Abyss Opening, suddenly born, expelling aberrations, bringing calamity to the surface world.

But that did not mean it was connected to the abyss for an infinite amount of time, continuously sending out things from the abyss.

After a certain amount of time, the part that had opened to the surface and the path to the depths midway would seal and close.

And so the things from the abyss would return to the sea before that happened.

The very thing from the abyss that Klaus had been fighting was retreating, taking a step back.

"— I guess that's the end of it —"

Arisa too planted her spear-blade tip in the ground.

However, klaus kicked off the ground.

Toward the aberration showing a retreating posture having lost its will to fight.

He kicked a pebble toward the aberration's face as a feint, and charged in.

The other side took the pebble squarely on the cheek, maintaining its posture, and stopped Klaus's sword.

At that moment, Klaus's kick drove into the aberration's solar plexus.

His drawn-back boot tip had a blade jutting out. The aberration, unable to avoid losing its balance, was then finished off by Klaus's returning blade.

Borrowing that momentum, he rushed toward another retreating aberration!

"— Hey, what are you doing!?"

"— Klaus, that's enough!"

Even the restraining voices of Arisa and Rugnard didn't stop him.

Don't be ridiculous.

In the depths of his chest, a dark heat.

He knew chasing recklessly was dangerous.

But.

Appearing with the sea. Doing whatever they pleased on the surface. When time was up, so long.

Returning safely to the sea, then when a sea appeared somewhere else, climbing up to the surface and attacking people.

He had no interest in sending such creatures off pleasantly.

One or two.

While there was still time, the more he could hunt now.

If the next time a Abyss Opening appeared somewhere — the number of things from the abyss crawling up could be one or two fewer. The number of those suffering damage from aberrations might be reduced a little.

That might be more of a wish than a possibility, but.

The nonstop fighting had left his physical strength near its limit, and various parts of his body were screaming. Even so Klaus didn't stop. Couldn't stop.

One more. One more, and one more still. Chasing retreating aberrations, running.

Rounding a corner of a house half-reduced to rubble —

An even more pungent smell of the sea struck his nose.

Spread out a short distance ahead was water.

A fear carved into something close to instinct stopped Klaus's feet.

Go no further.

His will said to advance, but feet and body wouldn't move.

Into the nearby water, a retreating aberration leapt in. A single droplet of the spray it splashed landed on Klaus's cheek and scattered.

A burning heat ran across his cheek.

"— Ugh —!"

The burning heat gave Klaus his freedom back.

The seawater was toxic to humans. Once the connection to the depths was severed, it would soon become harmless water, but for now the poison was still active.

Even he couldn't pick a fight with the sea. Klaus stepped back and put distance between himself and the sea.

"...Damn it..."

He spat, exhaled, and let the strength drain from him.

Only at this moment did Klaus realize, for the first time, that he was more exhausted than he had thought.

In the carriage, only the sound of wheels continued to echo.

All Maddock could do was stay silent.

An Abyss Opening had appeared inside the town.

In the confusion, Maddock and the others had boarded the carriage and left the town.

The carriage's windows had curtains drawn over them, the outside scenery was completely invisible. He didn't even know where they were heading now.

There was so much he didn't know.

Inside the carriage there were seats facing each other, with four people total. There was still room to spare.

Ahead and to one side, Lowell was letting out small, defenseless sleeping breaths.

Her innocent sleeping face looked almost like a child's.

But, (What on earth is this woman?)

That thought wouldn't leave Maddock's head.

Back in that town.

This woman had been in league with the things from the abyss.

He had wondered if she was controlling them with some kind of technique — but he'd never heard of any such technique.

Then, (What on earth was that?)

Of course Maddock himself wasn't fully conversant with the sea, with the things from the abyss.

No — not just him.

What the sea truly was. What the things from the abyss truly were.

The answers to those questions were essentially nonexistent.

At most there were things in mythology, something resembling a fairy tale.

Maddock too had heard something as a child, from someone.

Accordingly:

There was a benevolent god and an evil god, and as a result of their battle, the benevolent god Ohran sealed the evil god away in the sea.

The stakes used for the sealing were countless great trees. The sealing trees stretched their branches, grew, and where they rotted upon reaching the surface they became flat, becoming the great tree continent we inhabit —

But Ohran's sealing was not complete, and the evil god whose very name was sealed away created countless servants within the sea.¹

Those were the things from the abyss. Those who wished for the evil god's revival.

¹ It's theorised this is Chaotic Blue. King of the Blue Sky.

The still-undying power of the evil god sometimes caused part of the sealing trees to rot, and where a rotted tree had been, the sea appeared.

That was the Abyss Opening. The domain of the evil god. A gate connecting to the abyss that humans could never set eyes upon.

The aberrations, taking advantage of that moment, leap out onto the surface and trample the people — those blessed by Ohran², namely humans.

However, even if one sealing tree rots, the branches growing from the surrounding sealing trees soon block the path connected to the abyss and reseal it.

That was.

Probably a story even a child knew.

Probably a story that even scholars knew no more of.

Because humanity had been avoiding and keeping its distance from the sea, research worthy of the name hadn't advanced.

Even so.

To communicate intentions with the things from the abyss — a presence that could practically be called completely unknown —

And the true meaning of the words going to see the sea.

"— Max."

He had so many things he wanted to ask. But —

"Max."

Realizing that the name he was being called by was the fake name he'd given, Maddock turned his eyes toward the voice.

Sitting in the seat across — beside Lowell — was a stone-faced man in his early thirties.

He usually wore the hood pulled down low, but now his face was bare.

Short-cropped black hair. A face that could be found anywhere, but his gaze alone was unavoidably cold.

He went by the name Dressen, but whether it was his real name was anyone's guess.

Of course Maddock wasn't one to talk, either.

"— What."

Barely concealing his displeasure, he spoke, and Dressen, still stone-faced,

"Rest when you can."

"— I know."

He said it dismissively and averted his gaze. He didn't understand this man well either.

² It's theorised that this is the Blue Dragon God.

He understood nothing.

But there was one thing Maddock understood clearly.

That was that he had gotten himself involved in something dangerous.

The long night ended.

But that didn't mean everything was over.

The residents were beginning to clean up the town, wrecked by the appearance of the Abyss Opening.

Those who had lost their homes, or perhaps their families, still had to live through tomorrow.

And Klaus and company —

Were in line.

"In an orderly fashion! One at a time! Report honestly! Anyone who gives a false report or lines up twice will be thrown directly into the jail!"

"Don't make noise! The reward money will reach everyone!"

In front of the town's guard post, stakes had been driven and ropes strung, while the guards worked to keep order as a row of rough mercenaries lined up at length.

It was the custom that mercenaries who helped with the aftermath of an Abyss Opening appearing near a town or village — that is, repelling the things from the abyss — were paid a reward.

"But look. Aren't there obviously way too many people here?"

In the soft morning sunlight, Klaus murmured while looking over the line that wound from front to back.

Of course Klaus couldn't accurately grasp how far the battleground had spread and how many people had fought last night.

But no matter how you thought about it, the number in line was too many. It probably exceeded a hundred.

"There will be many false reports and imposters too."

Rugnard, standing ahead of Klaus in the line, said.

A false report meant claiming to have fought when one had not — but —

"Imposters?"

When Arisa asked from behind Klaus, Rugnard said matter-of-factly,

"People who aren't mercenaries, who strip the swords and armor off mercenaries who died in the fighting, put them on, and claim to have fought."

"That's fraud."

Arisa pouted.

"It is fraud."

Said Rugnard, matter-of-factly.

"But in that melee. There's no way to check who really fought and who really didn't. Even if it could be checked, the investigation would cost enormous time and money." False reports were thrown in jail, the guards had said, but in practice almost no one was actually caught lying and arrested.

Of course, whether you risked your life fighting or gave a false report, the amount you'd receive was the same.

"Something doesn't sit right with me."

"Speaking of things not sitting right —"

Klaus looked at Arisa in displeasure.

"The fact that you're blending in like you're part of our group also doesn't sit right with me."

She gave him a puzzled look.

"Eh? But we agreed yesterday to catch Maddock together and split the reward fifty-fifty, right?"

"There was no such agreement."

"Really? Don't tell me now you're going to say that's off? That'd be pretty uncool."

"It's not uncool! I'm just saying what never was, wasn't!"

Seeing the reaction was a weak spot, Arisa's eyes took on the look of a cat that had found its prey, and she broke into a smirk.

"Oh, so you think it's not uncool. Hmm.

From the outside it looks incredibly uncool, though."

At the obvious deflection and provocation, Klaus's face reddened.

"I said it's not uncool! Actually, it's cool!"

"...Klaus..."

Rugnard, who had been listening in silence, was about to admonish him when — Jingle jingle jingle jingle! A bell rang noisily.

Everyone fell silent and looked that way, and at the very front of the line — on a platform set up at the entrance of the guard post — a bearded man in armor that was less impressive and more excessive held his bell motionless.

"I am Guard Captain Gleam Mes!"

All of you, thank you for your assistance in repelling the things from the abyss last night!"

And so.

He began what was nominally a greeting.

But a senior person's greeting had a tendency to become a long speech.

The captain's greeting began with words of thanks and was now venturing into the subject of the mindset of those who fight. By the looks of it, there was a strong possibility of heading into the full course of old war stories and lectures to the young ones.

This is going to take a while, Klaus was beginning to feel inwardly irritated — When from behind the captain, an ostentatiously prompted clearing of a throat was heard.

Looking that way, among the lined-up guards, there was unmistakably one man of a completely different character mixed in.

Wearing neither armor nor weapon. Even from a distance it was clear the clothes he wore were of good quality.

His loosely wavy golden hair, and — handsome if you'd call him handsome — but he gave an impression of being either broadly easy-going or, to put it badly, a bit vacuous. The captain frowned and turned that way, exchanged a word or two in a low voice, and then reluctantly turned back to the group.

"— Ah.

Anyway, well done! Now, let's distribute the reward to everyone!"

A roar of cheers from the mercenaries.

— I see.

Klaus nodded to himself.

That blond man was probably some noble's son who had happened to be passing through this town. He had apparently noticed the speech was going to drag on and stopped the captain.

Nobles generally had an image of being pompous, and he wasn't particularly fond of them, but right now he felt a hint of gratitude.

The distribution of reward money began, and the line moved forward.

Eventually Rugnard, Klaus, and Arisa received their small pouches of money one by one. Leaving the line and immediately peeking inside —

Klaus and Arisa said in unison,

'...Ah...'

They made an overtly disappointed sound.

Just nearby, the guard captain was glaring at them with scary eyes upon hearing this, and the blond man who seemed like a young noble was stifling his laughter — but neither Klaus nor Arisa noticed.

What was inside was roughly enough to cover a few days' worth of food expenses.

Naturally, the more people receiving it, the less each individual got. The amount varied depending on the town's finances and the generosity of officials, but something commensurate with the risk of putting one's life on the line rarely came out.

"Well... this is about what you'd expect."

Rugnard too, saying this, was slightly displeased.

It was clearly not worth it, but complaining would be pointless.

Arisa sighed once, then switched her mood and smiled.

"So, let's go after Maddock together after all."

"That again."

To Arisa bringing it up again, Klaus muttered wearily.

Maddock's bounty was a considerably larger sum than the reward just received, but not something anyone would want to chase to the ends of the earth.

"He's probably long since left town. Going around chasing someone whose whereabouts we don't know — count me out."

Klaus dismissed it outright, but Rugnard was silently thinking.

"Don't you maybe... have something?"

"More of a 'there might be a lead to be found' sort of thing."

To Arisa's question with eyes lighting up, he carefully chose his words.

"Then, how about this: we'll look into that 'might be' and if we find something, we reconsider. But if it turns out to be nothing, you give up — how's that?"

"...Okay."

Arisa thought for a short while, then nodded.

"Hey, Uncle... Rugnard —"

To Klaus's obvious displeasure, Rugnard turned a smile toward him.

"If we don't do this, she'll keep pressing us indefinitely.

Besides, the reason it came to this was because you recklessly called out his name in the tavern."

"...Tch..."

That was something Klaus had no response to. He exhaled and lightly raked back his hair.

"— Got it. Fine, I get it.

So, what's this 'might be' lead?"

"The inn. And a good one."

Walking briskly through the streets, Rugnard answered without hesitation.

Stepping out of the inn's front door. Stopping right there simultaneously.

"...It hit."

"It actually hit."

"Something can actually hit."

The three said half-dazedly.

What Rugnard had focused on was Maddock's appearance.

The last time they had met, he was in clearly mercenary fashion — to be kind, no-nonsense and functional, to be harsh, rough and shabby.

But last night, his hair was groomed, his stubble gone, and his cloak was clearly brand new.

Rugnard had read this as meaning he had acquired a client.

If it were just a windfall, he'd put it toward drinking, eating, or women rather than his appearance.

So he'd imagined, perhaps the client had insisted, and Maddock was staying somewhere that required attention to one's appearance.

So first, they went to the finest inn in town and asked —

They got it on the first try.

A man who from his description and appearance seemed to be Maddock had taken a room with several others, and around the time the sea disturbance calmed last night, had left the inn in their own carriage.

"— But, look, we don't know where the carriage went —"

"What are you saying."

Arisa gave Klaus a withering look as he tried to make excuses.

"What do you think Rugnard asked about the carriage's features for?"

It sounds like a fine carriage not often seen around here, so if you ask around a bit, you can at least find out which direction it headed."

Rugnard used the carriage information to track Maddock while the group camped in the forest, gathered magical elements and food, and had an evening meal around a fire. When they had settled in a clearing off the highway, and Rugnard's cloak-repairing work continued, Klaus gathered firewood while Arisa watched.

"Interesting?"

"Yeah, pretty. Rugnard is surprisingly dexterous, and does quite intricate stitching."

"I'm not a sideshow."

Without stopping the hand moving needle and thread, Rugnard curtly:

"More importantly, if you could, go with Klaus to gather provisions. We have some dried meat and hardtack, but fresh things taste better."

"Okay."

Answering easily and standing, Arisa — and Klaus placing the firewood around as he said,

"You're surprisingly agreeable. Even though you were reluctant about camping out."

"Even if I'm reluctant, camping is decided? Then at least think about eating something good."

"Your mood changes quickly."

"No point dwelling on it."

Exchanging words, the two walked side by side toward the forest.

In the trees, birds and small animals — many edible among them.

Going a little deeper was a small lake — whether made from water gathering and flowing or an Abyss Opening site purified by sealing trees was unclear, but fish shadows were visible there too. No complaints as a water source either.

Eventually as they pursued prey, the sun gradually sank —

When the curtain of night descended. In an open area slightly off the highway, about three lights were lit.

One was a lamp made from the translucent skin of Nakua fruit filled with water and magical elements. The remaining two were campfire lights.

One campfire was for warmth. And the other —

"About time."

Klaus said, threw back the cold-weather cloak he was wearing, and when he scattered the second campfire with a stick, what appeared from inside was a large mud ball. The surface, heated continuously, had hardened.

Poking it with the scabbard tip of his drawn knife and cracking it open, the fragrance of meat wafted on the evening wind.

"...Wow..."

Wrapped in a cold-weather robe, Arisa let out a sound of involuntary admiration, watching with fascination as Klaus peeled off the hardened surface of the mud ball — and from inside a green mass emerged.

Peeling the wrapped green leaves further, a rich aroma filled the surroundings.

A steamed bird seasoned generously with herbs. That was the dish Klaus had made.

Other than the salt sprinkled on it, everything had been gathered from the area.

"Oh wow. Oh wow. This. Oh wow."

Arisa pointed at it, eyes sparkling beyond measure, alternating her gaze between the finished dish and Klaus, letting out incomprehensible sounds.

"Calm down. Go ahead."

Saying it while Klaus himself looked not entirely displeased.

"Amazing! I've revised my opinion of you, Klaus! So you did have a talent!"

"...You probably haven't noticed, but that's not exactly a compliment."

Klaus roughly cut the meat into portions and served them on improvised plates of stacked large leaves, adding baked potatoes.

"Well, this is about the extent of a party trick. A man being able to cook at least this much — it's the look of capability, right?"

Her gaze still glued to the food, Arisa nodded repeatedly.

"It's amazing, Klaus, it's cool! It's like the ideal mother!"

"That kind of cool I don't need. You get the small piece."

"What!? Why!? I complimented you! I want a big one, a big piece! After eating, I'll sing you a song as thanks!"

"A song?"

Klaus frowned, and Arisa nodded emphatically.

"Yeah. Even if I look like this, singing in a slightly larger tavern brings in enough to cover a cheap inn's stay."

"Seriously?"

"Oh. That I would very much like to hear. Klaus, just give her more."

"...Don't say 'I told you so' afterwards..."

Still giving a suspicious look, Klaus nonetheless gave Arisa a slightly larger portion.

Not exactly refined, but a good dinner with idle conversation mixed in.

Eventually, when the remains of the bird were down to bones, after a while.

A song began drifting on the night wind.

Against a backdrop of stars spilling down from the sky.

With the melody of leaves blown by the wind as accompaniment.

It was a lyric-less humming. Flowing, drifting. Dissolving into the night air and spreading.

Lit by the campfire and lamplight, Arisa made herself into a single instrument, spinning and performing the flowing sound.

In the quiet deep melody, Rugnard closed his eyes to listen.

Klaus —

"— Ah. Hold on a moment."

Spoke up and cut the flow of music.

"Sorry. My stomach's a bit off."

"Eeh. Does that mean my song is —"

"We were enjoying it so much and —"

The protests of Arisa and Rugnard stopped midway when they saw the cold sweat densely beading on Klaus's face in the campfire's light.

"...No... Arisa, your singing's something. Sorry for interrupting...

Just going to wash my face a bit."

He somehow stood up and said this, then turned his back to the campfire and walked toward the water source.

"...You okay?"

At Arisa's call from behind, he waved his hand in reply and kept walking forward.

What is this.

In his heart, Klaus murmured.

His stomach wasn't actually hurting.

The cause was the song.

He hadn't been complimenting Arisa's song as flattery. He had truly thought from the heart that it was beautiful, and also truly thought that as she said, it would be enough to earn pocket change.

But.

While listening to the supposedly beautiful melody, an incomprehensible unease welled up from deep in his chest. It gripped his soul like a nightmare one forgets the instant one wakes.

He had begun to feel genuinely ill, and had finally spoken up.

Now that the song had stopped, he felt somewhat better.

What's the matter with me... damn it...!

At his own incomprehensible reaction, Klaus could only feel bewildered —

These people.

What on earth are they doing.

That question, sitting like a shadow in the corner of his mind, was something Maddock had been unable to voice for a long time.

In a field far from any town or village, far from any highway — a place where there was nothing but grass and trees — were six carriages with notably different appearances stopped.

One of them was the one Maddock's group had come in, but — gathering from who knows where, three or four people each stepped out from the respective carriages — men and women in black robes and black hoods just like Lowell's group, like silhouettes. It wasn't unusual attire, but with this many all dressed alike, it gave off a somewhat eerie air. Was this a monastery?

The group scattered about, checking here and there with documents in hand, and eventually drew some kind of pattern on the ground.

Maddock could tell it was a pattern for using divine spells, but he couldn't go so far as to know what kind.

The silhouettes eventually formed a large circle, chanting incantations and making hand seals —

But nothing happened.

"It's not going to work."

After a brief silence, it was Lowell who spoke.

That was the signal for the silhouettes to gather while talking:

"Where's the problem?"

"The scale of the trees. Sand falls through a sieve, but stones don't pass through the mesh."

"I understand the logic of the metaphor, but to conclude from that it's a matter of scale is too hasty. Further multifaceted examination is needed."

"If in theory there are no issues with the incantation grammar and formula, is it not a matter of the magical elements' scale, timing of use, or the material used to draw the pattern?"

"No. The premise that there are no issues with the incantation grammar and formula is itself not unassailable."

"Anyway, the only option is trial and error, examining the differences from when it succeeded."

"But in that case, is it appropriate to pursue effectiveness in this direction as the primary objective?"

Various discussions started up.

Maddock stood a short distance away, letting their conversation wash over him.

No — to be precise.

He was trying to let it wash over him.

What were Lowell and company doing. What were they trying to do.

Sometimes.

An answer to that question would begin to float up like bubbles rising from the depths — as imagination.

But every time, Maddock hastily thought of something else.

Because if he came to know the answer. If he were able to imagine it.

He wouldn't be able to come back from somewhere.

A conviction-like premonition that clung to him constantly.

Of course questioning Lowell was completely out of the question.

Watching the standing silhouettes.

Maddock desperately thought of an old girlfriend.

The seedy tavern was filled with vulgar noise.

Alcohol, tobacco, and oil smells. Loud talking and stupid laughter.

— In any slightly larger town, there were taverns like this everywhere, and they all had the same atmosphere —

In a corner near the entrance of such a place, three people sat.

On the worn table, three cups — two containing not alcohol but water.

Plus a small dish of crackers.

"Grim state of affairs."

Opposite the disgruntled Rugnard, Klaus smiled slightly and raked back his hair.

"Complaining doesn't change anything."

"...Say, Klaus, didn't we have a similar conversation before?"

"You must have seen it in a dream."

"If so, it's an unpleasant dream come true."

"Okay you two. No gloomy faces."

Arisa next to them said, taking a sip of juice with a splash of alcohol for fragrance.

"You should at least cheer up a little since I treated you."

At her self-congratulatory tone, the two nodded slightly.

"Indeed. I'm grateful. One plate of crackers."

"I love it. One plate of crackers."

Arisa predictably looked disgruntled.

"...If you have complaints I'll eat them."

"No, that would be —"

"I genuinely am grateful."

The two hastily changed their expressions and insisted.

Five days since they started chasing Maddock.

They hadn't lost the trail of the carriage he was in, but the travel funds of Klaus and Rugnard were getting dangerously low.

After all, there had been no income since they received the reward for helping clean up after the Abyss Opening.

There had been a bit of piecework along the way, but nothing had come up.

— Arisa would sometimes earn small change performing at a tavern, but of course she wouldn't share it.

"Ah... I wish some easy, quick, not dangerous money-making opportunity would drop in my lap."

For once Rugnard didn't admonish Klaus's far-fetched wishful thinking.

"Same."

Actually, Klaus, wasn't it at a time like this, when you and I were having this kind of conversation, that that person walked in through the tavern door?"

That person was of course Maddock.

Klaus also looked at the nearby door.

"Right. At that time, I thought a money-making deal had come walking in on its own, but —"

At that moment.

The tavern door creaked open, and in walked a man.

Klaus and Rugnard froze.

The one who walked in was Maddock —

— Or not.

The good timing of the door opening had made them briefly expect something, but the customer was a completely different person.

A man in a robe, with golden hair, a stranger —

But wait.

"Oh? You people."

The one who stopped and spoke to the group was the golden-haired man himself.

Klaus did recognize the face, but couldn't for the life of him remember where from.

The man walked toward their table.

"You were quite active in Fyuper town. — Although, I wonder if you remember me."

The three were silent.

Fyuper was the town where Klaus and Arisa had met and the Abyss Opening had appeared...

Arisa figured it out first.

"Ah! The person at the guard post when we got the reward!?"

Klaus remembered too. The one who had stopped the guard captain's speech midway before it went on too long —

"Ah. That —"

Noble's son-looking person, he started to add, and just barely caught that at his throat.

"I was curious, you see. After all, at the time you were —"

The blond man leaned his body over the table, lowering his voice.

"Talking about Maddock."

— !?

Whether the agitation leaked into the air — the man smiled and straightened up.

"Would you mind if I joined you? I have something to say that should be not bad news for you either."

The three exchanged glances —

"Please."

Rugnard indicated the empty seat with his eyes.

"Thank you."

I am Fox Gohn. Feel free to call me Fox."

Waiting for the blond man — Fox — to sit down, Klaus and the others introduced themselves in turn.

Fox ordered drinks and snacks for everyone.

"About the matter at hand."

Once the ordered items were brought, paid for, and the server had moved away from the table, Fox opened his mouth.

"It seems you are pursuing Maddock.

I would like you, if possible, to capture him alive and hand him over to me."

At that offer, Arisa turned a troubled look toward Klaus and Rugnard.

But Rugnard, composed as ever,

"— That is to say.

You're prepared to offer something beyond the bounty amount on him, I can assume."

"Of course.

The terms I'm currently considering —"

Fox smiled and stated the conditions, which were indeed not bad.

A certain amount of advance money up front, with travel expenses including food and accommodation covered.

They could use the shared carriage if they liked, or rent a carriage if necessary.

In addition, a daily fee.

On top of that, if they accidentally killed Maddock, they would receive a little more than the bounty amount; if they captured him alive, nearly four times that amount —

Every single individual amount was above market rate.

In total it could only be described as exceptional.

"If I happen to get any information, I'll let you know as quickly as possible.

Of course, if it drags on too long, I may cancel the request, and if someone else captures or kills Maddock, there would be no success bonus.

— Those are the broad strokes."

Fox finished and closed his mouth.

The three stared blankly for a moment at the overly generous conditions.

"...Is this really okay...?"

Klaus murmured as if to himself more than as a confirmation, and

"Of course."

Fox nodded without hesitation.

But on the other hand, Rugnard and Arisa both had complicated expressions.

Tipping the cup and taking a sip of alcohol —

"— There's a catch — isn't there."

Rugnard asked, and Fox immediately with a composed smile:

"Yes. That's why this price."

That meant — don't ask about the circumstances. No unnecessary prying is needed at all. When the job is done, forget everything. That kind of meaning.

For those doing itinerant mercenary work, encountering a job with these kinds of conditions a few times wasn't unusual.

In such cases, generally, it was either crime-related, or if not that, related to the honor and reputation of some distinguished family.

If one carelessly got entangled in the former, before you knew it, you'd be neck-deep in a life's quagmire.

Now, which was this case?

Watching Fox out of the corner of his eye, Klaus thought.

This man had only stated his name and revealed neither his status nor position. He seemed to have the standing to give pointed remarks to a somewhat important town guard captain, but —

His connection to Maddock was also unknown.

Of course whatever the circumstances, the fact that Maddock was a wanted criminal who had killed didn't change. There was no pang of conscience in catching and turning him in, but —

The issue was whether they themselves would get tangled up in something strange.

He gave Rugnard a sideways glance, and Rugnard gave an almost imperceptible nod, then:

"What does Arisa think?"

"Why ask her."

"Do you know the expression 'ladies first'?"

Klaus fell silent. Because the sound of the phrase ladies first seemed somewhat gentlemanly and cool.

Asked, Arisa thought for a while, but eventually looked up, surveyed the group, and:

"I think we should accept."

"Then it's decided."

Said Rugnard.

What about my opinion? Klaus thought privately, but he had no particular reason to object.

Something was definitely suspicious, but if he turned this down here, there was no telling when the next job would come.

Even so, simply staying quiet and listening didn't feel right — Klaus turned to Fox, raking back his hair.

"I won't ask about unnecessary things — but you'll properly tell me what I need to know, won't you."

"Of course."

He leaned over the table, lowering his voice.

"Based on the information I have right now, Maddock's companions are probably four people. One of them is a woman, one is a driver."

"What's their background?"

"Unknown."

However, there is also a rumor of signs of a feud brewing among the underground organizations with a territory in the Tormarede territory.

Imagining from that —

"I see."

Klaus nodded.

A large conflict on the horizon, and they were taking in wanted criminals and mercenaries to build up their forces.

"But if that's the case, wouldn't laying a hand on Maddock put us in the organization's sights?"

"That would be fine."

Unless Maddock were a prominent member of the organization.

Knowing he's a wanted man and having just taken him in as a disposable new recruit — it wouldn't come to that."

"I suppose so. Assuming that guess is correct."

Rugnard's expression didn't reveal what he was thinking, but it was certain he wasn't fully satisfied with Fox's explanation.

In jobs with these kinds of shady undertones, being on guard was never a bad thing. If nothing happened, you could laugh it off as needless worry; but if something did happen, having prepared versus not was a huge difference.

Of course, some things in the world couldn't be managed by preparation alone, but —

"So where is Maddock now?"

Arisa leaned forward to ask, and the answer came quickly.

"According to the latest information, he was in the town of Layon as of yesterday. From there he seems to be heading west."

If the information was correct, he hadn't fallen as far behind as expected.

"The carriage has been moving slowly for a horse-drawn carriage, so I suspect they're frequently making stops. What kind of stops — that, I don't know."

"...Quite the intelligence network."

At Klaus's impressed remark, Fox, smile unchanged:

"Yes. Being quick-eared is my only point of pride. If I had confidence in my physical strength, I might have considered approaching directly.

As for the contact method, I'd like you to leave progress reports as messages at inns on your end, and I'll be in touch periodically on my end."

"You're not coming with us?"

Klaus asked, and Fox nodded.

"Yes. I'm afraid I have my own busy affairs.

Anyway, I'm glad you've agreed to take this on.

Let's leave the various small details for later — for now, let's celebrate the agreement. Of course, everything on my tab."

Tab — that sweet-sounding word.

This meant they'd be liberated from the misery of water and crackers, and Klaus and Rugnard, for this moment alone, raised a cheer from the depths of their hearts.

Slipping out the back door of a tavern into the night air, Klaus exhaled one large breath. Three days after accepting Fox's request. Using shared carriages to pursue the carriage Maddock was in.

They had arrived in the town of Urs roughly at the same time as night fell.

Taking a room and entering a tavern to gather information — there, Arisa had announced she would sing.

Of course with Fox as a sponsor now, there wasn't much point in earning pocket change, but singing was probably something like a hobby for Arisa.

— Same as always —

Every time he heard her song, Klaus felt ill for some reason.

He couldn't understand why at all.

Arisa's repertoire had several pieces, and none of them came from any particular original song — they were things she'd made up somewhat on the fly, she said. All had beautiful melodic lines, and Klaus did think they were good songs.

But, For him alone, continuing to listen somehow disrupted his condition.

Rugnard and the other customers listened normally, but...

When he was small, he'd once gotten motion sick in a carriage, and the sensation was similar. But songs giving motion sickness was something he'd never heard of.

Of course he couldn't say that out loud, and he couldn't tell her to stop singing.

So in the end Klaus, every time Arisa performed, simply endured it desperately, or pretended to be sick and hid in the toilet — or like tonight, slipped out the back door.

Even outside, Arisa's song was still audible, but breathing in a deep lungful of cool night air, his mood was somewhat better.

Lamplight spilled from the tavern window, but the narrow alley facing the back door had no other lights worth speaking of, and at the end of the alley, only deep darkness gathered.

"— A fine song."

Suddenly.

Called out from the depths of the darkness, Klaus hastily turned around.

Black rippling.

The movement materialized as a human silhouette in the faintest faint light.

From within that, only the face floated up white.

From the voice at first, he had known it was a woman.

A black robe and hood for cold weather, a figure as if blending into the darkness. From under the hood, a bit of golden bangs peeked out.

"Yeah. Fine song."

Leaning against the tavern wall, Klaus replied. Inwardly adding, just doesn't suit me, though.

The woman walked toward Klaus.

"You're not listening inside the tavern?"

"What about you?"

"I was drawn here by the song, but on my end there's a slight circumstance."

"Same here."

"— Is that so —"

The woman said, then stopped some distance from Klaus —

"Ey, how lovey-dovey, here in a place like this."

"Hey, cut it out."

Slurred voices came from the opposite direction the woman had come from.

Klaus looked and saw two men who were unmistakably, quintessentially drunk. One was so far gone the other was supporting him by the shoulder — the very picture of drunkenness.

They had apparently overheard Klaus and the woman's conversation and mistaken them for a couple's whispered words.

"How nice to be young! Flaunting it right out here, damn you!"

Getting caught up in this would be annoying. Klaus, remembering how Rugnard had once handled a drunk, said:

"Sorry if we were loud.

I was just in the middle of a debt conversation, so if you want to join in to help, feel free."
At those words.

The two drunks were silent for a moment, then:

"Don't have gloomy conversations right out in the street, damn you! We're going for another round to drive away the bad luck!"

"You've had more than enough! — Sorry to bother you!"

The two staggered, turned on their heels, and went back the way they came.

Watching them go, the woman chuckled, leaned against the wall near Klaus, and:

"I thought it might turn into a fight, but there's a way to handle things like that, isn't there."

"Just mimicking someone else, but."

Klaus smiled back.

The light was poor and he couldn't say for sure, but from her features the woman seemed younger than Klaus. Perhaps the same age as Arisa, or slightly younger.

Why she was wandering around at such a time in such a place he didn't know, but he had no interest in prying.

The two stood side by side as Arisa's harmony flowed over them for a while.

How much time had passed — from the song still going, probably not very long —

"Ah, here you are."

The voice heard from the same direction the woman had come from was a man's.

Quite the visitor-heavy back alley.

Materializing from the darkness was a man, also wrapped in a black robe and hood, just like the woman.

He seemed to be around thirty. The darkness might have made it look so, but his expression seemed decidedly stiff.

An ordinary face that could be found anywhere, but that somehow cold gaze of his bothered Klaus.

The girl took her back from the wall.

"I was drawn here by the song."

The man listened for a moment and said:

"A fine song."

"Isn't it?"

"By the way —"

He turned his gaze to Klaus.

"Who is this person?"

"An ally."

The girl answered while walking toward the man.

"I was almost accosted by some drunks, and he helped."

"Helped isn't quite it."

Said Klaus, still leaning against the wall.

"Whatever the case, it seems you received assistance. I'll express my thanks.

— Now. It's about time."

The man said, alternating between Klaus and the girl, and the girl gave a small nod.

"Yes, it's about time. — Well then."

Looking at Klaus, the girl — and at her side, something swayed. It took a brief moment to realize it was the hand wrapped in a black glove waving.

"Yeah. Later."

Without waiting for the two figures to melt into the darkness, Klaus shifted his gaze to empty space.

And before long.

A trembling voice dissolved into the night wind.

Arisa's song had apparently ended.

"— Well. Time for me to head back too."

Murmuring alone, Klaus pushed off from the wall.

Arisa returned to the table with a beaming face a little after Klaus had returned.

"Ah, sang and sang to my heart's content —"

The little pouch where she'd stowed her coins was quite full. Even if it was all small change, it would add up to a decent amount.

It seemed her singing had been well-received today as well.

That Klaus stepped outside every time she sang — Arisa and Rugnard had probably both noticed.

But as if having sensed something, neither of them asked. Klaus was grateful for that. He didn't understand why it happened himself, and whatever the part that was clear, voicing just that part would sound like — "Arisa's singing makes me feel sick" — which could only be heard as picking a fight.

Klaus raked back his hair.

"But it really is something. I can honestly say I'm impressed by that.

Maybe you could even make a living as a bard or something."

At the expressed praise, Arisa smiled.

"The 'that' part bothers me a little, but thank you.

So here, as a special thank-you for your great success — have Klaus treat me and —"

"Agreed, not bad."

This had Klaus hurriedly scrambling.

"Wait, no. This is where Arisa, who made money, treats me —"

"Agreed, not bad."

"Huh? Why am I —"

"...Uncle. Do you say yes to anyone else's treat?"

"Naturally. That goes without saying."

At the straightforward answer, Klaus and Arisa made eye contact and shared a moment of understanding.

"So then, after all —"

"The elder pays, that's how it goes."

"No. That won't do."

And so they batted idle talk back and forth.

While Fox was now a sponsor, that didn't mean they could eat and drink to their hearts' content under the name of expenses.

The thankfully miserable state of water and crackers on the table had been resolved, and now there was alcohol and decent snacks, but if they got carried away and went wild, that amount would come from their own pockets.

"Well, setting that aside —"

After a round of banter, Rugnard scooped up a snack.

"I'm going to do a bit of asking around. The two of you stay here and watch the bags."

He said, and stood up with cup in hand.

"I'll come too —"

"No."

Restraining Arisa who tried to stand.

"Stay here. It makes things easier in various ways."

He left it at that, turned on his heel, and headed toward the tavern counter.

Watching his retreating back, Arisa settled back down.

"He said it's easier with me here — what does that mean?"

At her murmur, Klaus stopped his cup mid-movement.

"Ah. He's using you as bait."

"Bait?"

Frowning, Klaus took a sip from his cup.

"It's a trick Uncle... Rugnard uses a lot."

He leaves the group himself, says something like 'those young ones left me out' and uses that to strike up a conversation with the uncles around the place."

"Hm."

Klaus and Arisa glanced over, and right on cue Rugnard and the stranger father next to him looked their way and gave small smiles.

That old man —

Klaus internally groaned.

From the expressions, Rugnard had probably spun some tale like I got left out by the young couple, so the odd one out took a seat here.

Of course he couldn't say that in front of Arisa.

He turned back to Arisa.

"And then, he never straight-out asks something like, 'Do you know a carriage like such-and-such.' There might be people who demand small change for information.

In this kind of case, probably —

He'd share some suitably gloomy bad-luck boasting, and within that flow, mention something like, a carriage like so-and-so splashed muddy water on me on the highway. If the other person has seen the carriage in question, something like 'I saw a similar carriage' would come back."

"I see. Rugnard is clever.

So we just need to stay here and chat like we're getting along?"

Arisa put on a cheerful smile, and Klaus met her with a fond smile.

"That's it. Getting along and looking like we're having fun is all we need, so the conversation can be complaints, food talk, whatever.

— For now, let's laugh a bit."

"Ha ha ha," the two laughed out loud together, and Rugnard and the father at the counter glanced their way and gave a bitter smile.

For a while after that.

Klaus and Arisa maintained the outward appearance of getting along while talking — first about things that made Rugnard bait, then drifting to stories about difficult clients, then somehow into ghost stories, and before they knew it, into food-related unpleasant stories.

"I cracked it open and this dark purple thing fell out, splat. The egg must have rotted inside."

"Hiiiiiyaaaaaaa....."

Klaus said with a friendly smile, and Arisa also smiled while letting out a thin scream.

"...By the way Klaus, I've been thinking for a while — keeping up a conversation with your feelings and expression out of sync is pretty draining, isn't it?"

"I know. I'm drained too.

But this too is for Rugnard's support. It's a job."

"A job, huh... when you put it that way..."

As the two awkwardly smiled and talked, Rugnard moved from here to there, changing seats and conversation partners.

Eventually, finishing a chat with some-numbered person, he came back to Klaus and company's table and sat down, immediately frowning.

"You two have been smiling the whole time and it's unsettling."

Of all the things to say that's what you open with!?

Klaus and Arisa, surprised to find themselves harmonizing in protest.

But Rugnard went on flatly.

"Both your smiles were stiff at the end.

You don't need to force a smile. Natural is fine in a situation like that.

On another note —

This might wrap up sooner than expected."

"Does that mean —"

"In other words —"

The two leaned forward at the table, and Rugnard nodded.

"There was someone who saw what seemed to be the right carriage, earlier tonight, in this town."

"In this town!?"

Klaus let out an involuntary yelp, and Rugnard gave a small nod.

"Yes. This town.

But calm down for now. As I keep saying, don't raise your voice.

Whether it's really that carriage or not. If it is, how many people are in it and what kind of people. Does Maddock ever move alone.

If we're going to act, we should confirm those things first, but there's a chance an opportunity may come by something. Be mentally prepared.

Anyway, tomorrow's plan will be to investigate around that area —"

Cutting Rugnard's words midway.

Thoom, with one sound.

The sound that resonated brought the tavern to an instant silence.

Klaus of course knew.

What that meant.

But...Something like this.

Other customers too froze in their places —

"Eh? The sea appeared again?"

The one who broke that paralysis was Arisa saying it as if it were nothing.

The tavern buzzed. With fear and confusion.

Klaus slammed out of his chair.

"...You're kidding..."

What he meant to shout came out small and raspy.

An Abyss Opening.

It wasn't originally a phenomenon that appeared often.

Perhaps once or twice in ten years in one region — or not at all. Some people spent their entire lives without any connection to such things.

For people like Klaus and company who wandered a wide area, the probability of near-misses was naturally higher, but —

Being present at the moment of occurrence multiple times in such a short period was simply impossible under normal circumstances.

And for two of those to be in the middle of a town, no less —

But no matter how much he insisted it was impossible, that didn't change reality.

"— Damn it!"

He muttered, grabbed the sword leaning against him and turned on his heel.

"Klaus!"

"— Wait —!?"

Behind him, voices of Rugnard and Arisa. He ignored them and reached for the door handle —

"Wait!"

Rugnard grabbed his arm from behind and stopped him.

"Don't rush! What we should prioritize right now is —"

"Let go! The sea appeared! They'll come right away! Those things! Even one more —"

Stopped, Klaus's blood rushed to his head. Even struggling to break free, Rugnard kept holding on.

"I'm not saying don't go! I'm saying don't rush ahead — calm down!"

"I'm —!"

He was about to say calm, and stopped.

He knew himself it wasn't true.

But his heart wouldn't listen. The impulse that kept welling up endlessly from somewhere deep and dark in his soul — to make one more, and two more of the things from the abyss disappear from this world — he didn't know how to hold it back. Not even Klaus himself knew.

"If you rush ahead alone you'll die for nothing! Even if you defeat ten enemies, if you fall it ends there! Then living on and continuing to fight means you can defeat more!"

"...I know..."

He relaxed and took a big deep breath from his shoulder. The impulse didn't subside, but it was considerably better.

"Then read the situation, come up with a plan, and work together. Don't run alone."

— Arisa. Will you lend a hand?"

Rugnard turned and asked, and:

"Sure."

Already, the girl holding her spear-blade — her answer without much urgency.

"Then, let's go."

At Rugnard's words, the three nodded, and together left the tavern behind.

Every step through the night, the smell of the sea grew stronger.

Go against the flow of people running away and you naturally arrive there.

The domain of the sea. The world the aberrations trample.

A scene seen not long ago.

The difference was the townscape — and that the three were coordinating from the start.

At a street with lamp posts, at a fork in the road the three scattered in three directions.

Klaus straight ahead, Arisa left, Rugnard right.

Each fought a suitable amount, and when the number of aberrations increased and they were beginning to be pushed back, they feigned being pressured and slowly retreated down the road they'd come from, and eventually reunited at the spot where they first separated.

Retreating all together a little from there, the lured things from the abyss came crowding in, cramming into one road.

Among the aberrations there were probably some who sensed the trap, but too late. Klaus and Arisa in front and Rugnard, who had retreated behind them, had already finished preparing his divine spell.

In the night, his standing red hair and the cloak defying gravity and streaming, cloaked in faint light accumulating the power about to be unleashed.

"Now!"

"On it!"

Klaus and Arisa, who had been holding back the leading aberrations, jumped back simultaneously, and that was the signal for Rugnard to release his strike!

"Hooves of the beast with countless horns!"

The bursting sound was like thunder itself!

The countless lightning bolts born from the ritual array dyed into the cloak pierced the empty air horizontally and shot through the aberration horde!

The smell of burning air briefly overwhelmed the sea smell.
Countless aberrations toppled without even being allowed a final twitch.
They hadn't been standing in a line. The ones who actually fell from this one strike were probably fewer than ten. But it was more than enough to unsettle them.
Rugnard began showing the motion of preparing another divine spell, and some of the things from the abyss hurriedly began retreating, while others, not letting that happen, charged toward Rugnard.
But standing in their way were Klaus and Arisa!
The aberrations in a panic trying for a forceful breakthrough — Klaus's sword, Arisa's spear-blade mowed them down!
Still, about three broke through the two and pressed toward Rugnard, raising their crooked coral swords —
Rugnard didn't flee, he stepped in.
His cloak parting, what the right hand swung up was one axe!
Splitting from ribs to chin and on the return the axe's back cracked and shattered the aberration's skull!
But another aberration circled around and thrust its sword toward Rugnard —
Clang! A hard sound.
The crooked coral sword was caught by the axe in Rugnard's left hand.
Dual-wielding hand-axes left and right. A feat of strength only the large-framed Rugnard could manage.
And then.
Rugnard flicked the fingers holding the axe in his left hand.
The small fragment that flew struck the facing aberration's face.
Too small and without speed to even be called a thrown stone. This alone would be no deterrence —
But Rugnard already had magical elements in his mouth.
Crunching them,
"Burst."
Instant.
The fragment burst right before the aberration's very eyes — literally!
A very modest explosion, but taking it point-blank to the face was no small matter. The reeling aberration was smashed by the right hand's axe.
The remaining one, seeing this, stopped its feet in wariness —

And then gave a lurch and toppled.

On the nape of its neck as it lay face-down, a small knife Klaus had thrown was lodged. While dealing with enemies in front of him, Klaus had still watched Rugnard's situation and sent a supporting throw.

"A skillful trick."

Rugnard gave a wry smile and murmured, then put the next magical element in his mouth.

Klaus sheathed his sword for no particular reason after bringing down some-numbered aberration.

The battle wasn't over. Even with their numbers greatly reduced, there were still aberrations remaining nearby.

One that seemed to take being ignored as an insult came charging — and was cut down simultaneously with the draw.

A quick-draw slash — which it resembled, but wasn't.

Whether the opponent was a person or an aberration, the more you cut, the duller a blade becomes.

The edge chips when it hits bone, and no matter what, blood and grease cling to the blade and dull the edge.

For heavy weapons like axes and great swords that cut by weight, the impact is overlooked, but for weapons that prioritize sharpness, it cannot be ignored.

For this, Klaus had rigged a mechanism combining a spring and a small whetstone into the locket of the scabbard. One draw and re-sheath — it couldn't completely restore the edge, but it could at least roughly scrape off the blood and grease.

Doing that motion in the middle of a melee would result in something that looked like a quick-draw slash, nothing more.

In the series of exchanges, the lured aberrations had nearly all been eliminated. The number defeated wasn't small, but many who flinched had also run away.

As numbers decreased, the remaining aberrations flinched even further.

The quick-draw slash took down one — and that was the trigger.

The remaining five or six aberrations finally moved to retreat.

"After them!"

Klaus's voice rose, and:

"...You're going after them..."

"Eehh...?"

Encouraging responses.

"I said we're going!"

He shouted and without waiting for an answer, kicked the ground regardless.

The aberrations, retreating as fast as they could, fleeing. Klaus fixed his eyes on a few of them and began the pursuit.

He caught up to the very last one, wavering between fleeing completely and standing to fight, and cut it down without even exchanging a single blow.

Without even slowing much, he continued the pursuit. Watching the surroundings without letting his guard down against ambush, he ran down the street —
— ? —

Klaus's feet came to a sudden halt.

Just now.

To the left of the road he'd just run through, a narrow alley.

He thought he glimpsed a familiar figure standing in the depths of it.

A robe with a hood. Yes. Like the girl and man he'd met behind the tavern earlier.

Of course it was a common enough outfit anywhere, but —

It had been just for an instant. It might have been a mistake, but it might be someone who had been left behind and couldn't escape.

Wondering about it, he backtracked a little and looked — and sure enough, in the depths of the alley, a figure clad in black robe and hood.

Not a mistake — but their number was roughly ten. Standing as if at an informal chat, neither fleeing nor doing anything at all.

It was an eerie sight, but before he could think deeply about it, Klaus had already called out.

"What are you doing! Run, quickly!"

At his voice the group flinched and turned this way —

Distance was there. There were scattered lamp posts, but the depths of the alley were dim.

However.

Among those who turned around, one. A white face peeking from under the robe.

To Klaus's eyes it looked like that girl.

"— What happened?"

Called from behind by Rugnard, glancing that way for a moment.

"Ah. There are people —"

Saying it while turning his gaze back to the depths of the alley — but there was only darkness.

Had there been a side alley and they'd left? If so, why had they been standing in a place like that until then?

This would look like Klaus's calling out was what made them run.

"People — what happened."

Rugnard and Arisa who had caught up looked at the same alley.

"There's nobody there."

"...Yeah. They were there a moment ago. It seems they've already run."

He murmured, half convincing himself.

By this time he'd noticed — the things from the abyss he had been pursuing had already fled somewhere.

Sounds and signs of battles still reached from various parts of town, but around where the three were, there were no longer any people or aberrations to be seen.

"Rugnard! Arisa! Moving to the next battleground!"

"Stop being so commanding."

"Being enthusiastic is fine, but think about your pace. The sea's time still has a long way to go."

"Yeah. I know."

He brushed the lecture aside, swept his gaze around deciding which way to go —

And Klaus's eyes stopped on the alley he had just seen the figures in.

The place that should now have no one.

A shadow standing there —

"...What...?"

At the very moment he murmured.

The shadow disappeared.

No — it had looked like it disappeared, but Klaus had seen. That the shadow had, in an instant, gone straight up.

"Something's there! Get back!"

He shouted and retreated, and Rugnard and Arisa retreated widely too.

There.

A shadow leaping from atop the alley — near the rooftop — landed exactly where the three had been standing until a moment ago!

A small tremor and — then the sound of water splashing.

"...What... is this...?"

Arisa's murmur said what everyone was feeling.

It was — how to describe it.

Its height, in a room, would reach the ceiling.

The body, coiled like a looper caterpillar, had countless twisted lines like blood vessels or veins running across it, and the part facing Klaus and company — was that a face?

Three black holes that could be seen as open eyes and a mouth.

On the left and right of its body, seven or eight legs on each side, resembling those of a long-legged spider. These were probably what enabled the feat of quickly climbing up between walls.

There had never been any story about such a creature existing.

But.

Its entire body was covered by a thin film of water, roughly the thickness of an extended finger, oozing and rippling.

It appeared at the same time the Abyss Opening appeared.

If so, its nature could be imagined.

"Could it be... this too...?"

In Klaus's murmur laden with wariness, Rugnard, not taking his eyes from the other party:

"Probably — that must be so."

"— Something from the abyss —"

Arisa raised her spear-blade.

A form vastly different from the fish-human type of things from the abyss they had fought so far. No idea what kind of attack it would make, or how to attack it.

Of course the other side didn't wait for them to prepare.

The large aberration charged straight at Klaus and company!

Every time its many legs kicked the ground, splap-slap-slap — a sound of slapping water rose.

Its speed far exceeded a human's full sprint. Given the other side's massive body, being hit would certainly not end well.

But toward that, Klaus kicked the ground!

Rather than think things over, unless you actually fought you couldn't know the enemy's moves. Then he would charge first!

Drawing his sword, he dodged right at the last possible moment before being crushed and exited its charging path, and mowed at one of its legs!

A strange sensation came back.

The sword had certainly caught the leg — but the clinging water slowed the blade and then the hard carapace under the leg blocked it, and the blade was deflected and swept away.

"— Ugh —!"

Immediately pulling the sword back and taking distance, Arisa was already about to make her move.

Holding her spear-blade horizontally, twisting her body:

"Black ones one two three four five! Blue ones one two three four! Explode!"

Saying it and kicking the ground at the same time!

The magical elements' flash burst on the spear-blade's back — and on the back of her own armor!

Accelerating herself and the blade at once, she dashed past the aberration's left!

The spear-blade swept through every single leg on its left side! The water cushion meant she didn't reach cutting or destroying them, but it was more than enough to throw the other side off balance.

Its left legs all swept out from under it, the aberration's body lurched and tilted.

With the ground trembling and water splashing it slid forward and kept sliding.

From the look of it, once toppled on its side, self-righting would be difficult. Then now was the time to press — Klaus and Arisa turned and toward the aberration —

Were about to rush in when.

The large aberration simply, casually, boing — got up.

Klaus for a moment doubted his own eyes and stopped.

— Just now —

What happened?

Normally, bending and extending legs, correcting overall balance, righting itself. That was normal.

But just now it had risen up without anything resembling such movement.

As though — as if plucked upright by some large invisible thing.

But right there.

"Shadow of the beast with a hundred tails!"

Crack!

The lightning strike Rugnard released drove into it!

Of smaller scale and force than the one released against the horde of things from the abyss earlier, but still of enough force to turn a human target to charcoal.

But taking that and not so much as budging, the aberration moved its legs, changed its direction, and charged toward Rugnard!

Rugnard ran and put great distance between them, dodging.

"Klaus, Arisa, pull back for now and form a plan!"

While merging with the two, he called out. But.

"Don't be ridiculous...!"

Klaus groaned at the proposal.

If this too was one of the things from the abyss — if it was an enemy to be defeated —

"You think I can do something as uncool as run...!"

Staring at the aberration with both fighting spirit and hostility in his eyes.

But Rugnard repeated:

"Don't misunderstand! I'm not saying to run — I'm saying to form a plan!"

"A plan —?"

That meant.

He had some idea.

The aberration turned toward them again. It was probably going to charge again.

Klaus had no desire to turn his back on a thing from the abyss, but —

"...Got it."

"Understood!"

At the two's replies as a signal.

The three and the aberration moved simultaneously!

Klaus and company dashed into a side alley, and shortly after, the aberration followed.

Compared to the charge moment, its speed was considerably lower, but still not a speed human legs could shake.

Splap-splap, the footsteps closing the gap from behind.

"It's catching up!"

"No need to worry!"

At Klaus's voice, Rugnard answered, and the lead Rugnard turned a corner. Klaus and Arisa followed without hesitation.

There was a single-story private home. Rugnard headed to its front door and reached for the knob.

"— Hey —!"

Klaus couldn't help but speak up.

With the aberration's height it surely couldn't get through a home's door.

But if the door was locked — even the slightest fumbling would surely send all three of them flying simultaneously.

Rugnard gripped the knob —

It opened.

The door wasn't locked.

Three entered one after another. Immediately after, a massive form passed by outside.

Arisa, last in line, hastily closed the door and locked it from the inside.

Just once.

Something collided with that door and it gave a creak.

While going inward through someone else's home unceremoniously:

"If the lock had been on, what were you going to do!"

Klaus complained — now that it was over — and Rugnard flatly:

"There was no way it would be locked."

Moving forward through the house:

"The sea had just appeared nearby. Normally one would run leaving everything behind.

There'd be no time to think about locking up."

When he put it that way it made sense, but.

The owners must have been awake before they fled. Lamps with fresh water and magical elements placed here and there brightly lit the interior.

Rugnard seemed to be heading toward the back door, but Klaus glancing back toward the entrance — the closed door stood silent.

A bad feeling ran down his spine.

"Wait, Rugnard! Where is it!"

"If it gave up and went somewhere else... that would be nice..."

Arisa's words without confidence.

Rugnard also stopped his feet.

"I don't have any idea why something like that would fixate on us — but indeed, being waited for when we come out the back would be unpleasant."

"But is that thing also really one of the things from the abyss...?"

Arisa murmured, and Rugnard made a troubled face.

"Given the timing of its appearance and the water it wears, there's no doubt it's the same kind from the Abyss Opening.

Whether it's appropriate to call something that differs so vastly in form and size by the same name, I don't know.

An old neighbor once told me there were things different from ordinary things from the abyss... so it wasn't because they were senile or making things up."

"Whatever it is, the question is how to knock it down.

Rugnard, the plan?"

At Klaus's question, Rugnard nodded heavily.

"First I want to confirm.

Klaus, Arisa — when you cut its legs, how was the feel?"

At the question, Arisa and Klaus each in turn:

"It's probably something like water, but the transparent stuff on the surface clings to the blade and kills the momentum..."

"And the leg underneath was also quite hard. I don't know about the body, but with my weapon I'd be hard-pressed to reach it."

If they tried slashing the body with a sword, the legs got in the way from left and right. From the front, the blade couldn't be extended before being crushed. Taking advantage of a gap, from behind it was reachable, but normally if you tried that, it would run forward accelerating and the attempt would fail.

If there were a long, sturdy weapon like a jousting lance, it might even be possible to use the other side's charging force to one's advantage, but Arisa's spear-blade was a little wanting in length and sturdiness.

"And my lightning technique had no effect either..."

I don't know if a different type of technique would work, but it wouldn't let me try so many times."

Said Rugnard.

As far as Klaus knew, Rugnard could also use divine spells that generated fire, but against something protected by a thick layer of water, he didn't expect much effect.

"For now what it's shown us is only simple charging, but there's also the possibility it has techniques it hasn't shown us yet."

"So what do we do?"

"My plan does exist, but —"

To Arisa's question, Rugnard glanced toward Klaus's direction.

"Klaus may find this a little hard to endure."

"Okay. Let me hear it."

There was no hesitation in Klaus's reply.

"— Don't get angry."

"I won't."

Immediately answered, and Rugnard gave a small nod.

"Hide and wait for it to pass."

"Just hold on a moment!!!"

"See, he got angry."

For some reason Rugnard made a smug face, and Klaus's face turned red.

"Of course I'm angry!"

You said a moment ago there was a plan!

What I'm asking about is how to knock that thing down! Not a strategy for not losing!"

"That's exactly it.

What I'm saying is a plan to win."

"We're not winning! We're only hiding!"

But Rugnard said with a serious face:

"Don't misunderstand, Klaus.

Then — in this battle, what does winning mean?"

Suddenly asked, puzzled but still:

"Well, that means... even one more of them..."

"Wrong."

Cut off bluntly.

"No matter how many enemies you defeat, there's no way to destroy all of the things from the abyss. We can't attack into the sea.

Fundamentally we are on the defensive. To win on the defensive means not losing — that is, not letting the other side win."

"...Not letting the other side win...?"

Klaus frowned, and Rugnard nodded.

"Exactly.

The goal of the things from the abyss is to kill as many humans as possible before the Abyss Opening closes. That seems a reasonable assumption.

Then, preventing that — reducing the damage as much as possible before the sea closes — is our goal.

Defeating the other side is merely a means to that end.

Fighting and being killed is a gain for the other side. Wasting time without casualties is a win for our side.

To that end, think about the best means."

The logic made sense. But.

"Even so! Hiding is just not right!"

"I'm not saying to hide until everything is over. Evade this one, and defeat the many ordinary things from the abyss.

Of course if we can defeat that big one, that's best. If you have a plan, tell me."

"If you don't fight, you can't figure out the enemy's moves either!"

"But with the tactic of stalling for time, there's no need to risk it just to explore the enemy's strength.

Distinguish between enemies you must defeat and enemies you'd be better off defeating."

"— But...!"

"Sorry to interrupt while you're getting fired up."

Arisa's voice cut in.

Turning a wary gaze upward.

"Don't you hear something?"

Said, he listened carefully —

Creak, creak, the sound of something creaking was from above.

Everyone probably harbored the same premonition.

"I wonder if there's someone on the second floor..."

Arisa's words — only the someone had slightly more force, as if she didn't want someone to be something other than a person.

"But this was a single-story building, wasn't it..."

Klaus said.

Creak. Footsteps stopped for a moment.

Creakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreak
reakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreakcreak!

At an unmistakably abnormal speed reaching directly above everyone's heads!

— !?

Instinctively sensing danger, the three bolted toward the back door at exactly the same time.

Crack!

Suddenly about ten sharp somethings pierced the ceiling, hanging down!

Their white tips reached nearly to the floor. If they had been standing directly below, well — that was something one would rather not think about.

The ceiling, full of holes and weakened, let out a creaking cry —

The three reached the back door. There was a lock on the inside.

A loud crashing sound — part of the ceiling crumbled down —

Rugnard opened the lock and turned the knob.

Cut, broken, fallen — above the fallen timber from the ceiling descended —

Opening the door, outside was night. The smell of the sea and thin darkness. And in the hallway behind them.

— The aberration.

"It was that thing after all!" "What were those pointy things just now!?" "If I'm going to be chased, I prefer a woman."

Saying various things, the three spilled out into the night.

Again from behind, the sound of splashing footsteps. Mixed in with it —

Rururururururururururururururur...

A sound like water being rolled in the back of one's throat.

Hearing the strange sound the large aberration made.

"Jump left!"

At Rugnard's resonating voice, reflexively Klaus and Arisa obeyed.

Instant.

Fssh, a sound slicing through the wind.

In the faint light of night, something thin and long and drawn out had, from far behind, pierced exactly where the three had been standing a moment ago — that could be seen.

It shrank immediately, but there was no time for careful observation.

The three ran down the street a little, ducked into another alley.

"What was that just now!?"

"That thing's attack!?"

At Klaus and Arisa's raised voices, the lead Rugnard still not turning around:

"Don't panic! It's simply an attack technique! Think of it like a type of divine spell that the aberrations use!"

"They can use that kind of thing!?"

"That's rather more reason to panic!"

"It's apparently called a deep technique!"

"We don't need that kind of trivia!"

Klaus barked.

The large aberration's weapons were clearly not just its massive body and charging alone. The fact that it didn't use it at first — was it looking down on them?

That speed, with defensive power on top, and adding such a technique.

"Isn't this pretty bad, possibly!?"

"Only realizing now, are you Klaus!"

Rugnard answered lightly. Whether he had composure or was past caring — which it was, was impossible to tell.

From behind the sound of something breaking.

A body that couldn't enter or exit through a door — but if it could use an attacking technique, breaking through a private home's door would be nothing.

Soon enough, footsteps closed in from behind!

Klaus and company dashed through the alley, out to the road —

The whinny of a horse and the roll of wheels.

On the verge of colliding with a carriage that came galloping from the side, Klaus and company hastily scattered left and right.

Surprised by the sudden occurrence, the driver mishandled the reins, and the carriage wheels swerved widely.

They narrowly avoided being run over by the carriage, but Klaus immediately remembered. That they were being chased.

At this rate the carriage would get caught up in it too.

"Get away fast!"

Shouting at the driver — and only after shouting did he realize.

A chestnut two-horse hitch. Black paint without any markings.

That carriage matched the description of the carriage Maddock was supposedly in far too well.

But before he could think this and that —

The night wind moved.

The aberration chasing Klaus and company burst out of the alley and with its momentum headed toward the carriage that had swerved —

But just before the collision.

The water covering the aberration moved!

What had evenly covered its entire body was, for a moment, completely ignoring its original shape, and like countless legs extended and flung its own body away!

The aberration, still wrapping itself in water, hit the side of a nearby house and rolled.

The carriage somehow regained its composure and galloped off.

The group stood dumbfounded watching the scene —

First to come back to themselves was Rugnard.

"Now's our chance! Move!" He called, coming back to himself, the three dashed into another alley.

...But just now, while running, Klaus temporarily forgot his hostility toward the aberration and thought about the meaning of what he had seen.

The large aberration had appeared to avoid the carriage.

Not to avoid being injured itself, but as if loath to injure the carriage.

Could such a thing happen —

Thinking while going, from behind there was no longer the sound of footsteps —

The dark night eventually broke and morning came.

There was a scene similar to one seen recently.

The residents were beginning to clean up the wrecked town. People slumped by the roadside were either simply resting, or despairing having lost something last night.

Walking through such streets heading toward the inn.

"But somehow it feels like we've cornered them."

Arisa's voice said with slight excitement.

Last night after that.

In the end they hadn't encountered the large aberration again, and the group had a few small skirmishes with fish-human type things from the abyss, and before long the sea's time ended.

When that happened, the very existence of that large aberration made it feel as if it had all been a dream — but others who had apparently seen it too meant the rumors reached their ears without anyone doing anything.

...Things like bigger than a house or if you make eye contact you die and various embellishments were attached...

Whatever the case, that large aberration seemed to have returned to the abyss as the sea's time ended.

Klaus and company had gone to an early hours — or rather pre-dawn, inn and slept for a bit.

In the morning, they woke up, lined up at the guard post, received the reward for cooperation with repelling the things from the abyss, and following that, gathered information on the carriage's whereabouts.

Back at the inn, they needed to leave a message for the client Fox, but once that was done, the pursuit would resume.

"It's certainly a fact that the distance has closed.

But in a sense, from here is the real thing.

Maddock won't be captured without a fight.

Almost certainly it will come to a fight.

To subdue, rather than kill, would take a little more effort.

We also don't know how skilled the other side is — all the more so."

Rugnard said while walking toward the inn, and Arisa made a puzzled face.

"You don't know their skill level? ...But you're acquaintances, aren't you?"

"We were only briefly together on a job once."

Klaus answered Arisa's question instead, while raking back his hair as always.

"That job too fell through partway, and in the end we never got to see him fight.

Meaning, we don't know until we try."

Of course — unlike the large aberration from yesterday, what he would use was certainly limited to what a human could do.

"In other words, don't let your guard down. Understood.

Anyway, once we leave the message at the inn. Let's chase after them quickly with the shared carriage or something."

The word message clouded Klaus's expression.

"— Say, Rugnard. About that message —

What do we include?"

"What do you mean, what do we include?"

Rugnard played dumb.

"So. Things like the Abyss Opening appearing, and the large things from the abyss appearing."

At the question Rugnard, still not looking Klaus's way:

"We were asked to secure Maddock. Other than that is unnecessary."

"But —"

Whether to say it or not — after briefly hesitating, Klaus still opened his mouth.

"The previous town. This town.

Where Maddock's — where that carriage went, the Abyss Opening appeared —"

"Klaus."

Rugnard's quiet call carried something in its resonance that allowed no argument.

"We were asked to secure Maddock.

Regardless of what hidden circumstances there may be.

What pertains to Maddock. Beyond that is unnecessary."

Right.

Fox had said from the start.

There's a catch, he'd said.

Having accepted the work knowing that full well, unnecessary prying was unneeded.

"I know..."

Klaus too, looking only ahead:

"No — I thought I knew.

I thought I'd decided I didn't want to get mixed up in someone else's hidden drama.

Whether some noble somewhere or people I've never met living in the underworld fight or fall — nothing to do with me.

But.

If — the sea is mixed up in it, the story changes, doesn't it?

We can't just say we're not involved."

"— Klaus —"

"That big one last night. It avoided the carriage before the collision.

If — even though it can't possibly happen — if —"

"Klaus!"

Rugnard raised his voice and stopped his feet.

Turning around, Klaus, instantly met with a stern gaze.

And then gave a small sigh:

"Then all the more, reporting is impossible."

"— I see — you're right —"

Klaus also let the tension fall from his shoulders, and the two began walking again.

"...Uh... well..."

Arisa, who had fallen a half-step back under pressure from the two, finally timidly:
"But there's no definitive evidence that the carriage and the sea are connected by something."

"Well, yeah." Klaus let the tension fall from his shoulders.

The Abyss Opening appearing twice where Maddock's — no, the carriage was, could simply be an extremely low probability coincidence, and the large aberration seeming to avoid hitting the carriage might also have had a different reason he wasn't aware of, and just looked that way.

Between those coincidences piling many times over.

And something like what Klaus had thought being possible.

Comparing the two — the former still seemed a higher possibility.

But, once thought of, the impossible-seeming imagination lay crouching somewhere in his head, casting a shadow on Klaus's heart —

He could laugh at himself from a short while ago.

A pittance of a bounty, a guy he knew came to kill him.

He'd been lamenting that as the worst.

With a self-mocking smile, Maddock walked alone through the night town.

Having slipped out of the fancy inn Lowell had taken in the middle of the night, wandering aimlessly through the town's rundown streets.

Apology-sized lamp posts stood sparsely here and there, making the darkness where light didn't reach all the more pronounced.

There was some blood spatter from earlier, but originally clothes like dirty rags. In the dim light, you couldn't tell if it was blood or mud stains. And even if it were seen as blood, there probably weren't any well-mannered people in a place like this who'd raise a fuss.

That was the worst? You fool. The worst meant someone like himself right now.

Thinking that, Maddock came to a sudden halt.

At that time, he'd thought that was the worst.

Now he believed this was the worst.

Then perhaps —

Something just beyond his imagination, a true worst, might exist.

Thinking that, it was somehow funny.

Standing still at the edge of the night, Maddock gave a small chuckle.

A passing drunk looked at him with strange eyes and walked past. A short while ago that would have annoyed him, but now something like that was irrelevant.

Lowell and company, who had initially said nothing to Maddock, had recently started showing him various things without concern.

Various things he didn't particularly want to see.

It wasn't the feeling of starting to be trusted. Probably they'd just stopped caring.

Last night too. In that town too.

Without hiding, he'd been shown something unnecessary.

Lowell had been in rather good spirits. Jumping up and down without reserve, saying it worked for the first time.

Maddock naturally hadn't felt like being happy about seeing something like that.

— He didn't think of himself as a good person.

He figured mercenaries were a trade of killing people for money, and basically other people's fates had nothing to do with him.

In a money dispute he'd killed someone out of impulse, and killed old acquaintances who came after him for the bounty. The aftertaste was bad, but it didn't sting the conscience quite enough to call it that.

He wouldn't deny being called a scoundrel or a thug even if it annoyed him.

But, even from Maddock's perspective, that —

...Tonight, let's drink.

In a seedy bar. Cheap strong alcohol only.

After all, that was probably all he deserved.

Maddock drifted and wandered through the night's lower town here and there —

And then — ran into someone.

Stunned.

Klaus and Rugnard, the two involuntarily stopped.

"Eh? What? What's happening?"

Arisa too slightly later stopped her feet, and looked at the two and the man standing where their gazes were fixed.

— Klaus and company had tracked the carriage, arrived here in the town of Karcosa, and taken a room.

Gathering information here and there — and the somewhat troublesome matter had come up.

Apparently this town had several similar carriages.

The road they'd traveled until now wasn't a place that fine roofed carriages frequently passed through, so they'd stood out — but

This town, with a large lake nearby and good connections to the castle town of the feudal lord of the area, Lord Tarsh, had become a villa destination for nobles and the wealthy. Roofed black two-horse-hitch carriages were not particularly unusual here. Of course, looking directly at one would tell if it was the same as that carriage seen last night, but the investigation hadn't reached that stage before the sun went down.

Let's start the investigation first thing tomorrow morning, they decided, and having finished a casual dinner somewhere along the way, heading back to the inn on the road. The group bumped into — "Maddock!"

By the time he'd shouted, Klaus was already kicking the ground.

He was wearing a common black robe, but the face was unmistakable.

"Eh!? That's him!?"

Arisa's voice from behind.

Maddock cursed and threw open the front of his robe.

The silver light released from inside — Klaus blocked it with the back of his left hand glove and without slowing closed the distance!

Klaus's leather gloves had enough durability, thanks to blades hidden all over them, to amount to decent hand armor. They didn't let through something like a small throwing knife.

But Maddock tore off his own robe he'd flipped open, spread it wide, and hurled it at Klaus, blocking his line of sight!

Klaus stopped his feet in a hurry. Not knowing whether the cloth blindfold was for escape or counter-attack, he couldn't rashly charge in.

The cloth blocked his vision for an instant.

In that instant Maddock had turned and was running away.

Maddock wore light leather armor covering his chest, and tough gauntlets on both hands. He might have a small knife or two hidden, but no notable weapons in hand.

All three pursued his back while:

"Arisa!"

"What!?"

Klaus confirmed something with Arisa.

"Don't tell me you never got a look at Maddock's face!"

"Well, no!"

Immediately answered, and his knees nearly gave out.

At this very moment. Arisa had seen Maddock and not recognized who he was.

Then, that could only be one thing.

When they first met at the tavern, Arisa had taken action — not seeing Maddock, but hearing Klaus shout out Maddock's name.

Maddock rounded a corner ahead.

"What about this woman!?"

Klaus asked Rugnard, and he however frowned:

"Don't tell me you only just realized this!? Klaus!"

"Did you already know, Uncle!"

All three reached the corner too. Looking, at the corner one further ahead, Maddock was just rounding it.

"Why did Arisa persistently invite herself to come along!? If she knew the other side's face she could search alone!"

"Exactly!"

"Stop with the smug face!"

Rounding the corner — but no sign of anything resembling Maddock.

Still, the three ran without slowing:

"Split up!"

"Okay! If you find him, signal with a whistle!"

"You're not in charge here!"

The three split at a suitable point, in their respective directions.

Going alone, Klaus ran through the night listening carefully.

His own footsteps. The sound of breathing. The wind rustling leaves somewhere, the distant din of drunken voices.

A sharp gust of wind.

Klaus jumped sideways half on intuition. Something hit something with a hard sound.

Looking — a short arrow on the ground near a wall a short distance away.

Phweet, one brief signal whistle. How long until the two came — he didn't rely on it, and swept his eyes around.

A dark street with barely any lamp posts. But there was no need to strain his eyes.

Klaus and the object of his attention — Maddock was crouching in the shadows slightly behind Klaus, but having recognized his sneak attack had failed, he turned and bolted.

—I'm Not letting you go —

Pursuing and running, Klaus pulled out one of the small metal pieces hidden in his armor and threw it!

Too small to even call a throwing knife, the blade had a small hole bored in it for weight reduction, and a scrap of torn cloth tied through it.

Called a blade shard, the weapon was originally for self-defense. Not much power or range, but convenient to carry, and even a novice throwing it tended to hit.

He aimed for Maddock's waist area. A hit there wouldn't be lethal, and if lucky might slow his movements.

The blade shard thrown from an unstable running posture, however, flew straight and was swallowed into Maddock's back —

"Ugh!"

Maddock gave a small groan.

The blade had grazed his belt and hit his spine. It had probably given a prick, but hadn't done much harm.

But that prick was more than enough to invite Maddock's anger.

"That Kid!"

Shouting and turning around, Maddock aimed his gauntlet at Klaus!

Two silver flashes cleaving darkness and wind.

Klaus dodged one and lowered his body to deflect the other off his armor.

— Ah, that kind of mechanism —

Klaus grasped it.

Maddock had likely spring-loaded arrows hidden in the gauntlets.

With gauntlets that size, the power and number of shots would be limited. Of course there was no need to take a hit regardless.

That just now, he'd probably fired the loaded arrow at the same time as throwing the knife. If he hadn't spotted two faint glints, he might have taken one of them.

Klaus drew out three blade shards in one hand and one in the other, and threw them at Maddock who had slowed to a halt counter-attacking.

Maddock easily dodged them all —

Klaus's finger moved slightly.

The blade shard that changed trajectory with the finger's operation came at Maddock from the side!

"!?"

Whether sensing the air, Maddock reflexively swung his left arm through the air. What tangled onto that gauntlet was the blade shard — and the thread attached to it.

"What is this!?"

He called out and shook his left arm.

Among the ordinary blade shards, Klaus had launched one with a thread attached.

A black thread hard to see even in daylight — in night it was virtually impossible to see.

The thread, made from thin strips of steel tree bark boiled with glue, was thin and strong. A blade could cut it, but once tangled many times over, it would be difficult to tear off by force.

Klaus closed the gap at a dash toward Maddock waving his arm and cursing in a struggle! Gripping the hilt of his sword —

Maddock aimed his right hand at Klaus.

He read it as a rigged arrow and twisted his body. As expected, a cutting sound passed the side of his head.

But at that moment.

"Ten faces of the beast, footprints!"

What Maddock unleashed was a lightning divine spell!

"— What —!?"

Maddock had not been cursing and struggling, but had been making it look that way to chant the incantation and form the seal, he realized now, too late.

Body posture unstable from dodging the arrow just a moment before! He forcefully twisted his body trying to dodge somehow —

Crack!

Pain burst through his entire body, sent flying, slammed into the ground back-first!

The strike had hit the chest of his armor.

Not a fatal blow. Whether the technique had limited power to begin with or the armor had blocked it — it hadn't even reached the point of robbing Klaus of consciousness, let alone his life.

But pain and numbness robbed his body of freedom. In his downed field of view, Maddock's approaching right hand held a knife.

But Maddock's pupils gave a small quiver.

He stopped just short, and stepped on Klaus's stomach.

Guhf — Klaus coughed up while looking up at him, and Maddock looked down at him.

"— Understood, kid?"

Flashing the blade in his right hand:

"If I'd used the knife here, you'd be dead.

Don't get cocky when you're weak."

Looking up and glaring at him, Maddock cast a contemptuous gaze:

"What's that look? Managed to get your back up?

If you're angry, fine. Two days from now, come to Dairas and try to stop us."

...What's that about...?

He tried to ask, but his still-numb tongue only let out a meaningless groan.

Klaus noticed.

In the eyes of Maddock looking down and mocking him — there wasn't even a speck of composure.

Maddock laughed Klaus off, and:

"Pretty pathetic, huh."

Left behind mockery and disappeared from his field of view.

Why didn't he finish him off.

What did come to Dairas mean.

There were questions — but setting those aside.

Annoying.

I'll kill him. Absolutely going to kill him.

Whatever the case, being completely looked down upon was an indisputable fact.

Even getting angry, the numbness in his body still hadn't faded. Trying to get up only had various parts of his body jerkily trembling in vain.

No choice but to relax and wait a moment.

"— Klaus!"

"Hey!? Are you okay!?"

The voices of Rugnard and Arisa reached him.

Even now lying flat was too uncool. Putting strength into his body again —

The numbness was somewhat gone. Shakily, but at least managing to raise his upper body off the ground.

"Are you okay!?"

Rugnard asked, and Klaus returned a wry smile.

"I'm fine."

Silence.

His tongue's numbness hadn't cleared yet.

"...Ah. You want to say you're fine."

"Injury... doesn't look like there is one..."

The two subtly averting their gaze was sad.

This was one case where it might have been better to feign unconsciousness until the numbness fully faded.

He thought that now but it was too late.

For the time being he leaned against the nearby wall and waited a moment for his condition to return.

Repeatedly opening and closing his hand. When those fingertips stopped trembling —

"...That bastard..."

Murmuring, his voice still shook slightly, but at least it had become proper words.

"...Suddenly used a lightning strike divine spell..."

"A divine spell wielder. That makes things a little troublesome."

Rugnard made a difficult face.

Being able to use divine spells or not made a huge difference in what could and couldn't be done in combat.

Accordingly, the difficulty of dealing with the other side when facing them increased significantly.

"I was off guard... got a shock and lost control of my body..."

The numbness in his body was almost gone. His stomach where he'd been stepped on still ached.

"So if we'd been a little slower getting to you, he might have finished you off."

Arisa said, and Klaus made a complicated expression.

"No — there was definitely a chance to finish the job.

But for some reason that guy changed his mind and said, come to Dairas in two days and try to stop us..."

"What's that?"

"How would I know."

Arisa frowned, and Klaus made the same expression and spat.

But Rugnard was matter-of-fact:

"Thinking normally, it's just a lie.

Rather than kill Klaus alone here, he judged it better to shake off our pursuit. He leaves a challenge-like message, and they head off in another direction.

If we dutifully show up, we end up waiting around in Dairas."

"Ah. I see."

Arisa nodded with an understanding expression, but Klaus —

"...You think so..."

He murmured quietly.

Rugnard's explanation was logical. It was natural to think that way.

But.

"Something on your mind? Klaus."

"Yeah... the eyes, you see..."

Eyes? The two inadvertently harmonized, and Klaus nodded.

"Maddock's eyes after he'd decided not to finish me off.

Looking down at me while — how to put it —"

He recalled. Maddock's gaze in that moment.

Strangely, inexplicably lacking composure, and in its place —

"— Right. Fear.

That look somehow seemed like he was afraid of something."

"Like his employer being a scary person."

At Arisa's words, Klaus gave his head a small shake.

"That's not it... I think. That felt more like he was afraid of something... unavoidable."

He leaned against the wall somewhat and somehow managed to stand up.

"So Klaus, you —"

"Yeah. I think we should go to Dairas."

To Rugnard's question, Klaus nodded without hesitation.

"There's no basis for trusting his words."

"I know, Rugnard.

That his logic is more consistent, and that Maddock isn't an honest man — both of those.

But his eyes —

Weren't like that."

Of course Klaus didn't think that looking into someone's eyes told you everything about them.

But the only thing certain was that in Maddock's eyes, there was a color like fear, like seeking help.

Even so, if someone said it was his imagination, he had no way to refute it.

In the end all he could do was turn his gaze to Rugnard.

The two looked at each other in silence for a while —

"— Whatever the case, then —"

Eventually it was Rugnard who breathed words.

"If we can identify the carriage, there's no issue. First, that investigation.

Even so, this town has carriages of a similar type. On top of that, we're short on people.

— We investigate for one full day tomorrow, and if we can't pin it down, we head to Dairas.

How does that sound?"

"Yeah. No objection."

Klaus gave a small nod.

No basis, but Klaus had certainty that something was going to happen in the town of Dairas.

The blue water surface shone brilliantly under the midday sun.

The opposite shore was too far to see, and standing at the water's edge, the horizon would fill one's view.

Not the sea. The vast freshwater lake called Hari Lake spread across three nations, bringing rich blessings to the surrounding lands.

Facing that lake, the town of Dairas existed.

Originally a simple fishing town, there had been a period where it looked about to become a villa destination, but a while back, political instability in the neighboring country Comorion facing the lake had caused refugees to flow in via the lake, and the public order was now deteriorating.

"...But will those guys really come?"

"You of all people, saying that now."

Walking and looking at the townscape, Klaus murmured, and Arisa immediately replied.

In the end In the previous town, they had been unable to identify the carriage in question.

The places the wealthy and nobles frequented — perhaps for that reason — the inns were tight-lipped about their guests, and almost nothing was gained.

So they had come here relying only on the words Maddock had left.

It was still midday. If something was going to happen today, it was probably at night.

After taking a room, dropping off bags, and doing reconnaissance around the area while gathering information —

Around the area entering town from the highway was perfectly normal. Inns and various shops lined it, with people coming and going.

But stepping just slightly off the main road, the atmosphere changed abruptly.

Old buildings. Makeshift shacks crowding the street. The clothes of people in the area were, naturally, not of a fine upscale type.

Whether original residents or refugees who'd flowed in was unclear. Mixed in with such people, there were probably shady types lying low too. Occasionally someone directed a sharp presence at them.

With Klaus and company in their mercenary-type outfits, no one approached to pick a fight, but it wasn't a place where a tourist could walk alone with peace of mind.

Listening for information here, looking around there.

By the time they had made a rough circuit of the town, the sun had begun to tilt somewhat.

No gains so far.

Had the carriage not yet arrived in this town, or had it already come and simply not been caught in the information net?

"— Klaus. Maddock said, try to stop us, didn't he."

As if just recalling, Rugnard asked while they walked.

"Yeah. Try to stop us and our group."

"If those words aren't a lie, what is he planning to do. In this town."

The answer to Rugnard's question — was within Klaus's chest.

But he couldn't voice something so absurd and impossible and dreadful.

"Who knows."

He let it pass, and:

"— Is that so —"

With a somewhat serious face, only murmuring, Rugnard didn't press further.

Klaus suddenly thought.

— Could it be —

Could Rugnard actually be imagining the same thing as himself? Was it that he wanted him to deny it, and that's why he asked Klaus for his opinion?

Of course that was nothing more than imagination.

"Now then —"

Brightly as if changing the mood, Rugnard to Klaus and Arisa:

"Shall we head back and have an early dinner?"

Of course that was for preparation for the night.

If Maddock's words weren't a lie.

Probably a longer night than anything so far.

"Sounds right."

"Same."

Klaus answered with Arisa, then looked up at the distance.

The sky was still blue.

But by the time they finished eating, the indigo curtain would be starting to fall.

What was going to happen, or not happen.

Holding a murmuring premonition in his chest, Klaus breathed deeply into his lungs the town's wind.

About when the last traces of sunset disappeared from the western sky.

The sound of wheels rang through the rough lower town.

A fine carriage rarely seen in such a place came into the street, occasionally scraping its body against walls.

Eventually stopping, from the carriage descended several figures with their bodies and faces hidden in robes and hoods.

One of the figures had a map in hand and began to probe the area, eventually starting to draw something on the ground.

The other figures stood around perfectly still as if protecting that one.

The residents of course didn't know. That in five other spots in the town, the same work was progressing.

Even in the rough lower town robed figures weren't unusual, but this was still an eerie sight.

There was still some brightness in the sky. Many residents had been outside. Most were just watching from a distance at the curious behavior of the black-clad figures, but —

"— Hey, what are you people doing there."

Naturally among them were those who would approach with more of a picking a fight tone than a question. Like this young man with a thug-like appearance.

The guard figure who was addressed, in a sour tone:

"...You'll understand soon..."

Just that.

But of course, that wasn't the kind of person who would retreat from that.

"Huh? What's that? I'm not asking when I'll understand. I'm asking what you're doing."

Another guard figure casually approached the loud young man —

And stabbed him.

Without a single shred of hesitation.

The sword tip that jutted from the gap in the robe entered from the man's solar plexus and pierced his heart.

Unable to even let out a scream, slump, the man collapsed. Every time his body spasmed, black blood pounded the earth.

The residents who grasped immediately what had happened ran away.

The figure who had stabbed the man drew close to the first figure, and with a stone face looked at the other.

"In a case like this, disposing is fine. Witnesses can be left alone. It doesn't matter — they'll all be otherwise occupied soon enough."

"...Right..."

Told, the first figure — Maddock — gave a small nod inside his hood.

A short distance away, the small figure who had finished drawing the pattern on the ground — Lowell — had begun chanting an incantation.

Dashing through the night wind.

Anxiety and a bad premonition were in the chests of the group.

Having an early dinner, leaving the restaurant.

That was exactly when. They had spotted in the distance a black carriage racing through the town toward the depths.

There was no doubt about that carriage.

The movement was far earlier than imagined.

They started chasing in a hurry, but human legs couldn't catch a carriage. But if they could catch up before whatever Maddock said they should try to stop started —

But.

"— Damn it!"

Running, Klaus suddenly stopped and muttered.

He'd picked up the faint smell of the sea mixed in the wind.

Rugnard and Arisa stopping with him before they could ask Klaus anything.

Thoom.

One beat, the ground shook.

Eventually before long, drifting on the wind were people's screams and the smell of the sea.

"— Impossible —"

Rugnard's and Arisa's expressions were hard.

Or perhaps the two had also, like Klaus, vaguely imagined it. But they wouldn't have wanted to acknowledge it. Such an outlandish story.

However.

"With this... it's confirmed."

Catching his breath, Klaus announced.

A chill ran down his spine.

Near the Abyss Opening, the fear and hatred he always felt.

However, the target for those emotions right now was not the things from the abyss.

A ferocious smile at the corner of his mouth as he shaped his words.

"The people who got in that carriage...

Are creating the Abyss Opening —"

"...No way..."

"That can't be..."

The two voices that denied it were hoarse.

Klaus caught his breath:

"What are you saying... both of you had half figured it out...

The sea appearing where that carriage went... the large one that avoided the carriage...

Maddock saying try to stop us...

And an Abyss Opening here too...!

There's only one conclusion...!"

"But... is such a thing... even possible...? I've never heard of it..."

"Neither have I."

Not wanting to believe — or trying somehow to negate it — against Rugnard who kept resisting, Klaus declared:

"Don't tell me at this point you're going to say this might all be overthinking on my part.

If it turns out I was overthinking, afterward everyone can point at me and laugh and that's the end of it.

But if it's not — this is no time to be saying soft things. Isn't that right?"

In Klaus's chest there were various feelings.

The fear and hatred toward the Abyss Opening that swallowed the village he was born and raised in, and toward those who welled up from there.

The antagonism toward Maddock who he'd fought and gotten the worst of.

All of that went flying.

Finding the true enemy he should defeat — those who cause Abyss Opening to appear.

"— You're right —"

Arisa hesitantly nodded.

"Whatever the case, this is no time to be standing still.

Fine then. What do we do."

Rugnard with a sigh.

Asked, Klaus without hesitation:

"Obviously.

Top priority is find the carriage and strike it.

The people in it — including Maddock — I want to capture them alive if possible, but depending on the situation.

Rugnard, for now — the next time we spot that carriage, without mercy or hesitation, hit it once with everything and immobilize it!"

"Understood."

Everyone nodded at the same time and ran again.

In the direction the carriage had headed.

But the biggest problem was whether they could make contact with that carriage.

How far had it gotten — unknown.

If his imagination was correct, the carriage would be near where the Abyss Opening appeared, but with both sides moving, the possibility of passing each other was high.

Charging recklessly like this probably had a low chance of finding it, but with no way to gather information when fleeing people were the only ones around, there was no option but to advance.

Going against the wave of fleeing people —

Thoom.

The earth that shook — everyone —

Not just Klaus and company, but probably most of the people in this town froze.

— The meaning of this tremor —

"Ha! This is...!"

Klaus muttered with a strained smile.

The sensation running down his spine — even he couldn't tell himself whether it was fear or anger.

"Even Maddock must have freaked out...!"

Right. Just now.

A second Abyss Opening had appeared in this town.

"These guys...! They're trying to destroy this place!"

— The smell of the sea mixed into the night was only growing stronger —

How long he'd been running through the streets, Klaus didn't well remember.

The panic now overflowing everywhere in the town. His own sense of time had been distorted by the various negative emotions swirling in his chest toward the sea.

What was certain was that the time that could be called dusk had long since passed, and stars shone in the sky.

With night's arrival, lamps lit in the houses — but what that light illuminated was not a family gathered for dinner, but crowds of people fleeing in confusion at the calamity.

Nearby residents had either all fled or hidden. The three ran through a strangely deserted road.

From partway through, the one giving direction on which way to go was Rugnard.

No idea what basis he had, but he said right, left, straight ahead and kept running.

Or perhaps he was working out roads the carriage could pass through, given the town's layout and the flow of people, the Abyss Opening appearance locations — but —

Whether coincidence or inevitability.

Turning a single corner on a road somewhere they no longer recognized in the town —

What they saw was six carriages racing down a street with scattered lamp posts!

Among them the black-painted one — Klaus certainly recognized it. At this rate, the group would pass down the road right before them.

"Rugnard!"

Catching his breath he called, but the large red-haired man had already finished preparing his divine spell.

"King unseen who crawls through the sky."

Nothing visibly seemed to happen with Rugnard, but the wheel area of the black carriage that was passing by burst and shattered!

Probably a wind divine spell, invisible.

"Ugh!"

A small groan from Rugnard.

It seemed the aim for the wheel had been slightly off.

Even so the carriage's axle swayed and the wheels swerved. It didn't reach a single-blow takedown, but serious damage had been dealt to the wheel area.

Rugnard immediately began preparing the next divine spell —

The carriage door opened.

The figure that leapt into the night wind shot both hands out from under the robe.

Klaus and Rugnard each made a large jump to dodge.

Or hitting the wall behind, or jutting into the planking wall nearby, were short arrows.

The wind threw back the hood of the descending figure, baring their face to the night wind.

"Maddock...!"

Arisa called the other party's name.

"Move!"

"Move? As if."

Klaus's voice drawling his sword without hesitation, Maddock pulled out, making a point of it, one short sword each in both hands from behind his waist.

In the meantime, the carriage righted itself and went on.

"Getting left behind."

"I can see that without being told."

Whether ordered for stalling or ordered to buy time — from the point of composure unshaken by Rugnard's point, probably stalling.

The black carriage receded. The axle damaged, its speed was considerably slower than a moment ago, but still far faster than human running pace.

If shaken off here, probably no next chance.

"You wanted us to stop you, didn't you!"

Klaus roared at Maddock bearing down.

"That's why you didn't kill me!

Then get out of the way!"

"Fat chance!"

Maddock matched his voice.

"I said try to stop us! I didn't say I'd stand still!

What are you begging 'please stop' for! How soft in the head!"

"— Fine then — I'll stop you!"

If it had been a different meeting, Klaus might have thought about returning the earlier debt, fighting one-on-one — but this wasn't the time to say such things.

Because the real enemy wasn't Maddock.

At Klaus's declaration, all three kicked the ground at the same time — Klaus, Arisa, and Rugnard!

Rugnard in the middle, Arisa and Klaus each flanking right and left.

Facing them, Maddock kicked the ground himself and charged at Arisa!

A reasonable tactic for one against many. Quickly damage the target who seems easiest to take down, and try to balance the numbers even a little.

Not aiming for Klaus who had once fought him and knew his moves, or Rugnard who seemed like a veteran, but Arisa carrying a weapon oversized for her build — it was natural to see her as easy pickings.

Arisa held her spear-blade high and swung it down, and Maddock charged toward her without hesitation!

What was probably in his mind was the picture of dashing past and slashing the girl's side before the weapon came down.

But, Maddock accelerated further closing the distance —

"Out of the way, young la—"

"Black three, explode!"

Cutting off his mockery, what resonated was Arisa's voice and the sound of a magical element bursting!

The fragment bursting off the blade's back drove the iron mass forward!

At the same time Arisa rounded her back like a cat, and as a result the blade that should have been sluggish accelerated far beyond Maddock's expectation and closed in!

Maddock's face twitched, and he deliberately dropped his left knee. Losing his balance and rolling along the road, he escaped the blade with a paper-thin margin.

If he hadn't intentionally rolled, it would have split his head or shattered his chest through the armor — either way it would have been over.

Using the rolling momentum without killing it and springing back up:

"...What...! What kind of idiot uses a weapon like that!?"

Klaus, also running toward Maddock, toward Arisa:

"Are you trying to kill him outright!?"

Capture if possible — that had been the plan.

"If I hold back I get killed! And besides, there's no time to go easy, right!"

Using the momentum of the blade to right her posture, Arisa.

Maddock's expression said, at least don't go after me with that woman.

"The other day you gave me quite a lot of help!"

Klaus raised his voice, drawing Maddock's attention while rushing in to cut off the path between him and Rugnard.

He knew Rugnard was preparing a divine spell. Feinting a charge then jumping sideways, and right there Rugnard would release a strike.

Blocked up to the last moment and then attacked — dealing with that should be difficult. Even if that were dodged, if Maddock's posture was thrown off and Klaus cut in —

However.

"Very welcome, I'm sure!"

Saying it and at the same time, Maddock without hesitation turned on his heel and ran away!

"Ah! Wait you —!"

Klaus hastily shouted, but there was no idiot who'd stop and accept a three-on-one just from that.

If Maddock's purpose was stalling, that purpose had already been fulfilled. The carriage was already long gone from sight.

Maddock was just about to dash into a nearby alley —

"Uwahh!?"

He let out a cry and jumped far back.

What appeared from that alley was —

"— This thing...!"

Stopping in a hurry, retreating widely, Klaus groaned.

The body coiled like a looper caterpillar, with several legs on left and right. At chest height, three black holes opened suggesting a human face.

Covering its entire body was a thick layer of transparent — water.

It was.

The large aberration that had appeared before the three in the town of Urs.

If the absurdity that the people riding that carriage were causing Abyss Opening to appear was possible, then an inhuman aberration being allies with the carriage would be no surprise.

Probably as a guard for the carriage, it had been running parallel in an adjacent street. The aberration moved its legs and slowly looked at Klaus and company.

"...Coming all the way here for the job, what service."

Klaus said lightly while slowly retreating.

Of course there was also the possibility it was a different individual that just looked the same, but.

"An unwelcome reunion."

"I wonder if you'd call this a 'bad penny' situation."

Light remarks while the expressions of Ragnard and Arisa were also hard.

"Heh, ha ha."

Maddock on the other hand was wearing a strained smile, circling around to the back of the aberration's massive frame, clearly directing at the aberration:

"Well then, I'll leave the rest to you."

"— You —"

Anger lit in Klaus's eyes.

Maddock's attitude indicated two things.

Just as imagined — Maddock and company had formed an alliance with the aberrations.

And one more thing.

"So when you told Klaus and company to try to stop you — what was that about!?"

Arisa suddenly spoke up.

Toward Maddock who had stopped behind the aberration:

"You even told them the town's name!

It's because your conscience was hurting you for helping with something like this, isn't it!?"

Her raised voice — Maddock behind his aberration shield however laughed it off.

"Hah. What do I care."

"You were really just scared, weren't you!? Getting involved in a big incident!"

Arisa pushed further.

"We and your employers could wipe each other out. Then you alone can run away smartly.

That's what you were thinking, right!"

One more thing — the reason Maddock had told Klaus and company this location.

It wasn't that he couldn't bear the pangs of conscience. It wasn't that he was moved by a sense of indignation at not being able to let this pass.

Just as Arisa pointed out — intending for Klaus and company and their employers to clash, eliminating both those who had gotten him involved in something outrageous and the pursuers.

Otherwise, he wouldn't be relying on the aberration here.

"So what if I did!"

Maddock didn't deny Arisa's point.

"Worst! You're planning to kill your employer too if it's inconvenient!

Could you be more selfish!"

"Call it rational, if you please!

I got paid, but I'm not putting up with this dangerous business any further!

I'm getting out right about now!

You all just play around with the monsters here!"

At Maddock's words as a signal, the large aberration began moving.

Moving its many legs — and turning toward Maddock.

"...Eh...?"

Maddock let out a dazed voice, and:

"— Ah. I knew it —"

Arisa spoke up.

"You hadn't imagined that possibility — that it might understand our language."

Just before finishing saying it.

The aberration's stepping leg, casually without a care, effortlessly crushed Maddock's body flat.

Whether it's a person or an aberration — the end of a traitor was similar.

Without leaving a single scream — or perhaps without even understanding what had happened to him.

Maddock became a crumpled mass on the road.

The one who crushed him was the aberration, but the one who had the conversation was Arisa.

"Arisa you —!"

"Complaints later! It's coming!"

Cutting off Klaus's complaint, Arisa raised her spear-blade.

The aberration that had instantly crushed Maddock to death now slowly turned toward Klaus and company.

Far behind it.

With crooked swords hanging at their sides, from far down the street, several figures began appearing and approaching.

Those were the familiar fish-human type things from the abyss.

...Klaus for his part had no desire to get used to seeing them...

One large one and fish-human type in numbers. Fighting head-on — no chance of winning.

If they charged into the mass of fish-types, they could take down a considerable number in a melee — but in exchange they'd almost certainly die.

Then, running away —

"Aren't you going to do a tactical retreat this time? Rugnard."

The three gathering, Klaus asked, but Rugnard however:

"I'd like to, but... it probably won't let us go. Given everything.

If it understood what we know, it understands how far we know. The other side can't let us go."

"I saw it again and had thought I wouldn't, but if it comes to this I wish I'd properly thought out a plan against it."

Arisa said, but it was too late now.

However at that moment.

Ruuuuuuuuuaaaaaaaruliiiiiiuu.

The large aberration roared.

No — from the way its form visibly shimmered, accurately speaking, it was making a sound by vibrating the water it wore on its surface.

Hearing that, the fish-types that had been approaching from behind began to scatter into side streets.

"I'm fine alone here,' maybe?"

Arisa offered an impromptu translation, and Klaus gave a strained smile.

"I heard 'if you don't want to get caught up in the flashy stuff, scatter,' but either way, it's quite cool."

Or perhaps — judging that Klaus and company would move to flee in this situation, it had intentionally reduced its own allies to invite the choice of fighting.

Whatever the case, that was the beginning of the battle.

Taking the fish-type aberrations scattering as a cue, the large aberration kicked the ground!

The high-speed charge seen before!

Klaus and Arisa jumped left and right, and behind them, Rugnard had finished preparing his divine spell from the instant the aberration appeared!

"Eyes without number opening in a moonless night sky."

An instant, countless eyes opening across the huge body!

The eyes stretched thin branches, intertwining like vines, binding the aberration's movements!

Tripped legs tangled, the large aberration's massive frame tumbled spectacularly.

Klaus nearly caught up in its trajectory escaped its path.

"Let's retreat for now —"

Rugnard started to say, but then his words froze midway.

For fish-type opponents, Rugnard's technique would seal movement for a while — enough time to buy sufficient escape time.

But the water covering the tumbled aberration stirred.

Shifting and instantly changing shape, it became countless small sickles erupting from the mesh!

Water sickles wriggling and cutting through the binding net took no great time.

As the bindings were destroyed, the countless attached eyes vanished in an instant.

The water film covering the massive body — here shrinking, here swelling — as if the water itself were a single living thing, undulating and drifting, without almost any movement of the body itself, raised the aberration's massive frame upright.

"Klaus! Arisa! This thing is using the sea water it wears with techniques to control offense, defense, and posture! The claws and spears we saw before were also the water changing shape!"

Seeing it, Rugnard called out.

Right.

The ceiling-piercing claws and the long spear piercing empty air. And rising from toppled with no natural movement.

All of it was the water the massive body wore.

The water that freely changed form became weapon and shield depending on the time.

"We can't do anything unless we strip the water off it!"

"Strip it, you say!"

Arisa said while guarding. No matter how many blades were swung, splitting water was the best you could do.

Using a blade to strip it was an unreasonable request.

"Anyway, we have no choice but to try!"

Klaus spat out with a sour expression.

The aberration moved.

Apparently having figured out that charging Klaus and company only to be dodged gave them an opening, this time it went at a walking pace — first heading for Rugnard! The divine spell wielder taken down meant the two relying on weapons had no way to defeat the aberration. That must be the judgment.

But.

"Rugnard! I'll leave this to you! I'm going after the carriage!"

"Counting on you!"

Klaus called while simultaneously turning on his heel and bolting, and Rugnard answered raising both axes in guard!

The aberration hurriedly changed course. From Rugnard to Klaus, bolting with his back turned! Movement too changed from walking pace to charging speed —

Riruuuuuuuuuuuuuu!

The water the aberration wore trembled, and from its tip a long long water spear at Klaus's back —

"Now!"

At the same time the water spear began extending, Rugnard called out!

The instant Klaus turned and deflected, evading the water spear and swinging his sword in one slash!

Splash! The sound of sea water.

The water spear half-severed, the severed tip lost its power and became ordinary sea water, scattering to wet the ground around it.

The aberration launched its first strike at Klaus. Just that.

The water covering the aberration trembled and formed large blades of water left and right!

Their thickness and width such that Klaus's long sword couldn't cut through them.

Wherever Klaus fled left or right, the water blades would bisect his torso!

Staying put meant the same end as Maddock!

But Klaus pushed straight ahead toward the aberration without veering —

And jumped.

Stepping over the aberration's back, the surface of the water it wore, and landing on its other side.

Of course Klaus couldn't walk on ordinary water. It was possible only because the aberration had raised the viscosity of the water it wore to the extreme limit for defense against the blade.

From the other side's perspective, Klaus must have looked like he'd disappeared right in front of him.

The large aberration slowed and turned — and facing it was Klaus with sword raised. In the first place.

Klaus never intended to chase the carriage alone. But saying it and making a run of it — an enemy that understood human language would have no choice but to target him. The gist was: a little three-word bluff to stop the divine spell-preparing Rugnard from being targeted.

The aberration with water blades still deployed on left and right charged at Klaus again. Klaus drawing it in sufficiently —

"Right!"

At his shout, he jumped right simultaneously!

There, closing in — the aberration's blade!

Splash! Sea water echoed again.

The water blade extending from the aberration's right had been severed midway.

By Arisa's spear-blade.

What Klaus's long sword couldn't sever with its width, the spear-blade's length and width could. Having become a blind spot with Klaus leaping over the aberration's back, Arisa stood there and at the moment of his jump delivered that strike.

The two standing where the blade had collapsed were unharmed. And.

"King unseen who crawls through the sky."

The divine spell Rugnard had been preparing struck the root of the remaining water blade!

"We can do this!"

Klaus's voice raised as he dashed!

"Keep stripping the water this way and eventually it'll be bare naked!"

Instantly putting his left hand against the flat of the blade, he rushed toward the aberration and swung a slash!

The blade was entangled by the sticky water slowing it, deflected by the carapace beneath. The aberration thrust out a water blade toward the approaching Klaus! But Klaus saw it was uncuttable and deflected his body to evade, and again sent a strike at the aberration! The next water blade it generated, reading it as cuttable, severed and scattered it, then another strike at the aberration's torso.

Dodge, slash, sever, slash.

Evading the other side's attacks, severing those that could be severed. Sending strikes at the aberration's legs and torso without pause.

Klaus continued unleashing ceaseless slashes.

The way he stepped without a moment's rest resembled some kind of dance.

The frequency with which the aberration generated water blades visibly decreased.

Recklessly generating water for attacks only to have them severed one after another would eventually exhaust the water it wore. Just as Klaus had pointed out.

In fact, the water covering its entire body had already diminished — if only slightly — in thickness.

If it returned to the Abyss Opening water could be replenished, but leaving here once for that purpose would certainly mean losing Klaus and company.

The aberration was struggling to press the attack, while on the other hand Klaus's slashes couldn't sever let alone properly damage the aberration covered in water and carapace.

Even so Klaus continued thrusting his sword at the aberration regardless. Occasionally putting his left hand against the flat of the blade, using the steel edge to slice water.

The tactic of provoking the aberration to attack and draw out attacks to strip away water — seeing it that way, the aberration turned from Klaus to face Rugnard.

This was what Klaus had been waiting for.

The moment the aberration let the attack lapse and moved its attention from Klaus to elsewhere.

He released his long sword and drew as many blade shards hidden in his armor as he could with both hands, then threw them at the aberration!

The blade shards all sank into the sticky water, momentum immediately killed, barely reaching the body or not, slowly beginning to sink into the water.

At that moment.

Klaus drew the larger magical element hidden in his armor, put it in his mouth, crunched it.

And shouted.

"Explode!"

Pshew!

At Klaus's command, the aberration's massive frame exploded!

The blade shards threaded through slashes against the aberration's body, and the blade shards just thrown.

Hidden in the knot of the cloth tied to the metal fragments were magical elements.

These all detonated and scattered at once.

Each individual detonation was nothing special. But they propagated through the water resonating with each other, the explosion blowing off the water the aberration wore!

Simultaneously.

"Crimson unknown descending from the sky."

Rugnard activated his prepared divine spell!

Suddenly appearing luminous crimson lines instantly drew a circular pattern on the ground around Rugnard, extending and touching the aberration — at that instant.

Boom!

An explosion-like flame erupted, engulfing the aberration's massive frame!

Even a strike that would char an ordinary opponent, against an aberration wearing thick water, would probably only reduce the water's thickness somewhat.

But the blade shards Klaus had embedded with magical elements had scattered most of the water simultaneously, and striking at virtually the same time —

After the flames subsided.

The large aberration with all its water stripped away.

Still seemed to be alive, but — there.

"Black one two four five! Blue one two three four! Explode!"

Accelerating her spear-blade and her own body, Arisa slammed the spear-blade from behind into the aberration's body!

Crack! The sound of carapace splitting! And then.

Gibiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!

Scattering carapace with a scream, what flew out was a black — something.

Nothing but something would fit.

If you painted a person pitch black, made just the torso extraordinarily elongated, and grew several arms from both flanks — it might look like this.

Both eyes were large and yellow-clouded, with only the pupils being black points. It burst from the collapsed carapace and flew out, and casually crawling away on countless hands while the stunned group watched!

"— Is that the main body!?"

Rugnard's voice brought everyone back.

"I'm Not letting it go!"

Klaus dashed and drew blade shards, throwing them!

Gyabut! The black form cried out and shuddered.

The metal pieces this time easily embedded in it.

Klaus drew a new magical element and put it in his mouth —

StopStopStopStopStopStopStopStopStopStop!

It.

Sounded like a human voice.

At the wretchedness of what writhed and shrieked, a chill ran down Klaus's spine.

Without thinking, he detonated the magical element.

Sploomp.

The black something's body burst.

Scattering dark body fluids it fell silent.

Whether in death throes or final convulsion — for a while, only countless arms flailed and slapped the ground, and eventually stilled and slowly stopped.

That was the end of the large aberration — whose name none of them even knew.

What remained was the black grotesque corpse and a mountain of hollow shells.

Everyone.

Was silent for a moment without thinking.

"— Not yet —"

Klaus came back to himself, picked up the discarded sword and sheathed it.

"There's still the carriage."

"Ah — right."

"Y... yeah."

Rugnard and Arisa who nodded were, if anything, pale.

Nobody mentioned the aberration's shriek sounding like a human voice. Nobody wanted to mention it.

"...No matter how many of those we beat, unless we do something about the ones making the Abyss Opening, it doesn't end."

Trying to forget and change the topic, Klaus said, his face also pale.

Without waiting for a reply he turned on his heel and ran in a trot toward where the carriage had gone.

Rugnard and Arisa too followed running after Klaus.

"Think we can catch up?"

"How should I know."

Arisa asked Klaus's back, a blunt answer.

"But we have to catch up, right."

"...You're right... with this, as expected..."

Listening carefully — from the night, the sounds of confusion.

Maddock was dead, and Klaus and company had defeated the large aberration, but that didn't mean it was over.

Still in various parts of the town, the battle of people and fish-human type aberrations was continuing.

Leaving that carriage alone would probably mean another Abyss Opening appearing, people and aberrations killing each other again.

That could no longer be allowed.

But whether they could find that carriage one more time was uncertain.

"...But Arisa... you made such a big deal about Maddock's bounty, and then you let him die just like that... we might not get the success reward since we weren't the ones who took him down..."

Trying to distract himself various ways, Klaus addressed Arisa alongside him.

"...Mm..."

Arisa let out an ambiguous groan, then was quiet for a while, but eventually —

"...This might make you angry, but..."

The mayor who was killed in the incident that put Maddock on the wanted list —
He'd done a little favor for me before, you see —"

"— Ah —"

Klaus was speechless for a moment —

"As I expected then —"

Two passing Rugnard murmured, and Klaus looking at him:

"Wait a moment, Rugnard...! 'As I expected' — what does that — right —!"

Klaus grasped something and was startled.

"Saying it that way here would sound cool, wouldn't it...!"

"No. Look, Klaus.

Arisa went to such lengths to pursue Maddock despite not even knowing his face, for such a small bounty.

One could imagine she had some connection to him.

I deliberately didn't ask about the circumstances... but don't tell me you hadn't even noticed that?"

Asked, Klaus raked his hair lightly.

"No... I'd also figured that was something like that."

"...Well, fine..."

"That's actually more uncool, Klaus."

"What was that!? ...But if it was to avenge someone she knew... I should have charged Arisa a finder's fee..."

"I'll treat you to a meal or so.

Well... revenge isn't quite the grandiose thing it sounds like —

What do you call it, I wanted to put things to rest. Just — that much."

"...Then after everything is done... I'm expecting a good treat..."

Klaus smiled and groaned —

"— Klaus?"

Arisa noticed his change.

Klaus's face had gone pale, forehead and cheeks beading with agonized sweat.

She noticed his running pace had slowed.

"Don't push yourself."

Rugnard slightly ahead.

"You must be in pain. Leave the rest to us and rest a little."

"I'm fine."

Klaus said, but his expression looked anything but fine.

"What do you mean, not pushing... what does it mean?"

Asked by the worried Arisa, Rugnard after brief hesitation:

"...Long ago, I once taught Klaus divine spells."

"Rugnard..."

Klaus groaned, but Rugnard regardless, his back still to the two:

"In terms of aptitude, this one had more than I did.

At first I thought he'd make a good divine spell wielder."

"...Don't..."

[Rugnard continued speaking.]

"But perhaps as the cost of too high an aptitude. Using techniques places a serious burden on Klaus's body."

"A burden — what kind?"

"Don't, Rugnard —"

Rugnard, his back trembling, said:

"This guy —

Whenever he chews magical elements, he invariably gets an upset stomach."

That was —

A fact too sad in far too many senses.

Arisa gently placed her hand on Klaus's shoulder.

"I think — you're actually quite handsome, Klaus."

"...What is this out of nowhere..."

To his stone-faced question, Arisa gave a gentle smile.

"I could even say you look good."

"Even complimenting me won't —"

"So — from now on, can I call you the pitifully handsome one?"

"...I'll cut you... I mean it..."

Klaus said, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

"Eh? Why? I was only trying to cheer you up —"

"Ha ha ha. You're certainly going to get energized from the anger at least."

Just as he was thinking about what to do with this woman.

"— Hey!"

The voice Rugnard ahead raised had a tinge of unmistakable tension mixed in.

Stopping his feet at the corner of a crossroads and keeping his gaze to the cross street:

"A carriage."

Just one word.

Klaus instantly, even forgetting the stomach pain, exchanged glances with Arisa and ran in a small trot to look that way.

In the street ahead, one overturned black carriage.

One of its wheels broken and detached and rolling, two horses still hitched. One horse was still struggling, but the one underneath no longer moved.

There was no mistaking it was that carriage.

Apparently Rugnard's one strike had dealt serious damage to the wheel area. It had temporarily recovered its posture, but the wheel had finally broken and overturned coming this far — probably something like that.

Coming close there was no sign of a person, and the driver's figure was also not to be seen, either they escaped or —

However, Mixed in the wind faintly was the smell of blood — something well acquainted to mercenary Klaus and company.

Arisa ran closer, climbed up on top of the overturned carriage, and maintaining her guard with spear-blade, threw open the skyward-facing carriage door.

A moment of silence.

"What happened?"

Klaus asked looking up from below, and Arisa, the moon behind her, still looking down into the carriage:

"— There are people inside —"

"In it?"

Rugnard.

Arisa stayed that way unmoving for a while, but eventually abruptly said:

"I'm Getting down to examine."

The Announced one-sidedly and descended inside.

"Ah! Hey!"

Klaus's call was already too late.

After a while, Arisa crawled out with a complex expression.

"Three people there."

She leapt from the top of the carriage to the road.

"Two men. One woman.

All stabbed with a bladed weapon — dead."

"Stabbed with a bladed weapon?"

Rugnard.

"Yeah. I don't know what it means, but —"

"— Don't tell me Maddock —"

A certain imagination crossed his mind, and Klaus opened his mouth.

"He'd already dealt with them himself...? Before leaping off?"

To that speculation, no one answered yes or no of course.

But without saying it aloud, the three were thinking the same thing.

Is this really truly over? — thus.

No one here knew the answer.

But if Maddock had survived, and looked at the faces of the three who had breathed their last in the carriage, he would without doubt have said:

— Who the hell are these people —

Inside the Dairas guard post, there were few people.

Caught up in the aftermath processing of the Abyss Opening appearance, most of the guards had gone out.

In such a post, in the deserted conference room, Fox Gohn was drinking tea alone with his eyes cast down on a sheaf of documents.

The documents were a summary of known damage situation to date.

Although — the refugee district where two Abyss Opening had appeared was a place where even the number of residents had been ungraspable to begin with. On top of that, last night's commotion.

What the actual damage was — getting an accurate answer would be impossible.

Fox was looking at some-numbered report when.

A tentative knock sounded.

"Come in."

"Excuse me!"

What came in opening the door was a middle-aged man enclosed in imposing armor.

The guard captain here.

After giving Fox a perfectly rigid salute, loosening his posture and looking down at the documents in hand:

"The carriage you were searching for has been found, abandoned on the road!

No sign of anything resembling a driver, and inside three people. One woman, two men.

All wearing black robes and hoods, stabbed with a bladed weapon and dead. Identity currently under investigation, but as this will take time, bringing you the discovery report first!"

"Is that so. Thank you."

Fox floated a gentle though somehow vacant smile.

"If you wish to inspect the scene, I can guide you there myself?"

"No — that won't be necessary.

I'm sorry for the trouble, but please continue to investigate the identities."

"Understood! Then excuse me!"

"Thank you for your work."

After giving another salute, when the captain left the room.

"— I see —"

Fox leaned back in the chair, murmuring alone.

"They hired skilled ruffians as guards, but betrayed and killed them —"

Taking the tea cup in hand, bringing it to his lips:

"Is that the storyline you want to make...?"

He drank a sip of the now-lukewarm tea down his throat.

The sky was blue.

The breeze blowing through the green streamed the girl's golden hair.

"But, a walking journey like this is a pleasant thing as well."

Pausing to look at clouds on the road, the girl in blue clothes stretched with a big reach.

"But Lady Tenia."

One of her companions, a stone-faced man in white clothes, spoke to the girl.

"At present it can't be helped, but we can hardly keep walking forever. We'll need to acquire transportation somewhere."

"Don't be so stiff, Langru. People need a certain amount of composure. Learn a thing or two from the young lady."

Another of the four travelers, a mercenary-looking man, threw a quip at the white-clothes.

"...You say that but I'm worried regardless... anyway right now I just want to get as far from that town as quickly as possible..."

The fourth man murmured in a mosquito-thin voice. Large-framed, a vicious enough face to make a child cry, but hunched and looking down, muttering:

"...Whether those people will really believe we're dead..."

"That's fine. Even if they're not fully fooled by that."

Tenia — the girl who had kept using the false name Lowell with Maddock the whole time — with a bright smile:

"Having a moment of time is sufficient. If the threads are cut, a great help. If they're fooled on top of that, ideal, but hoping for that much is greedy, I suppose."

A black carriage, black robes and black hoods, and on top of that, companions as wanted criminals.

Throwing away all of these features at once, even if they figured out the bodies were stand-ins, tracking them from here would be difficult.

"And about the transportation and things —"

Turning to her companions, walking the road backwards:

"Let's return once to Father's place. Since we've also gotten a good handle on the stable summoning of mid-level bodies, we have various things to report.

He'll surely be pleased."

She flipped her skirt hem and turned forward.

Her bright smile carried not a single drop of regret or malice —

"— That was the whole story —"

"...Hmm..."

In a corner of a Dairas restaurant.

Finished hearing Rugnard's report, Fox Gohn fell into a troubled silence.

Maddock's death concluded the request.

Having made that judgment, Klaus and company had taken lodgings in Dairas and decided to wait for Fox's contact.

It was expected to take a while, but on the morning two days after the incident, he had casually appeared at the inn.

Changing locations to this restaurant of Fox's choosing, they had explained the rough circumstances —

Things too suspicious to speak of aloud — someone caused the Abyss Opening to appear, or that aberrations and humans had been in league — were naturally unspeakable.

The result of fudging that area to make things add up coherently meant: We found Maddock in this town, but the other side was killed by something that comes from the abyss — a report that somehow sounded like Klaus and company had done absolutely nothing.

If Maddock had died in a different way, they could have claimed they were the ones who did it, but looking at a corpse crushed flat by a large aberration, it was obvious it wasn't a human's doing.

Yet hiding the body would of course lead to the question of whether they had actually taken him down.

"Well then..."

Fox had been lost in thought for a while, but suddenly looking up, in a conversational tone:

"By the way, what will you all do after this job is finished?"

"I don't have any particular plans."

Arisa answering somehow.

"Neither do I, specifically."

Klaus raked back his hair and continued. Rugnard for a moment looked like he wanted to say something, but gave up.

At the answers, Fox tilted his head.

"That is to say — might you all not actually be traveling companions?"

"Me and Rugnard have been traveling together for a while.

With Arisa over there, we just briefly teamed up over the Maddock thing."

At that, looking at Arisa — she returned Klaus's glance.

"Oh... come to think of it, this job being over means there's no more reason to be together. I'll be a little lonely to not be able to watch Klaus anymore."

"Don't say 'watch.'

Well, if we're alive, maybe we'll meet again sometime. Rather than getting sentimental, let's drink and eat and say a pleasant farewell."

"Does that mean I'm treating?"

"That was the agreement, wasn't it?"

The two exchanged glances and smiled.

"That being the case, perfect timing."

Fox having listened pleasantly:

"I've been thinking about various things for a while now.

I believe there's no doubt that you all made every effort this time.

However, since it was not you who killed Maddock, contractually I cannot pay the success reward."

This was a flow of events Klaus and company had expected. After all that hard work to come to this result — it wasn't satisfying, but there was nothing to be done by complaining here.

"Can't be helped."

Rugnard shrugged.

Fox maintained his smile.

"However, it would weigh on my conscience greatly to not evaluate your efforts at all.

That's what I've been mulling over.

As compensation with a dual purpose, there is something I'd like to ask of you as a separate matter.

Of course I'll make the reward worth your while."

...At the proposal, Klaus and Arisa — the two froze while maintaining their smiles.

To be frank.

Absolutely out of the question.

Without saying it aloud, Klaus and company were thinking. That Fox's true goal was not Maddock, but the carriage Maddock had been riding in.

If so.

If they nodded here, there was a premonition — no, certainty — that they'd get caught up in another troublesome affair again.

"Ah, sorry, but we —"

Arisa's smile strained, and Klaus looked elsewhere, raking back his hair.

"After this, we have a few plans —"

"You don't, do you?"

Fox's smile didn't change.

.....

Come to think of it, just moments ago, the two had said something to that effect.

As expected, saying now that was a lie, we're incredibly busy right now was beyond them.

But Rugnard alone — as if having expected this flow of events:

"No, it's true we don't have work plans.

But with various things, we've gotten somewhat beaten up in various places. We were thinking of resting a bit.

Your kindness is appreciated, but my apologies."

"All the more then.

Fortunately, I know a good doctor who I'll introduce you to. Of course treatment costs and the like will be covered by our side.

So, won't you at least hear what I have to say?

Not here — moving to another location."

With a gentle tone yet still holding firm — this stimulated the group's bad premonitions.

"...No. If it's only hearing the story here, that would be fine. Whether we can be of assistance is another matter."

Not wanting to be taken somewhere strange, Rugnard said with a smile —

"Is that so. That's a shame."

Fox said, and tapped the table three times — tap tap tap.

Instantly.

The entrance door opened, and from it — or from inside the restaurant. What flooded in was armed regular soldiers!

With smooth, practiced efficiency, they completely surrounded Klaus and company's table, all placing hands on their sword hilts.

Not ceremonial long swords. Shorter swords easier to maneuver even indoors.

To the involuntarily frozen Klaus and company, Fox declared with unchanged smile:

"Fox Gohn of the Tarsh territory, Information Investigation Division.

I didn't want to do anything that would offend your feelings, and I'm sorry it came to this.

I apologize, but for the prevention of important information leakage, we will be temporarily detaining and taking you into custody."

Thus.

The journey of Klaus and company —

It seemed it still showed no sign of ending.

Afterword

I love the sea. But I love the strange creatures of the deep sea even more.

Hello everyone. I am the author, Hajime Kanzaka.

With that said, allow me to present the first volume of the new series, Abyss Gate.

Now then.

As those who read this story may have noticed, the original spark of inspiration was Cthulhu horror.

Brief explanation: What is Cthulhu horror? Old American horror. Because the original author hated seafood, the evil gods ended up described as squid-and-octopus-like, and from a Japanese perspective they look rather tasty. The backbone of the protagonists who keep writing in their diaries even with footsteps approaching from behind is impressive.

Of course since it was only used as a starting point for inspiration, the setting is completely different, and the protagonist doesn't write a diary either.

It's not that the author wanted to write horror — it was from the purely motivated impulse of if sea creatures are the enemy side, I can get a ton of strange creatures in there! that I started this series.

As a child I quite liked looking at picture books and encyclopedias, and was drawn to certain things like Nipponites (a species of ammonite — shaped like a clay craft made by a disinterested elementary schooler) in prehistoric animal books, and from that I suspect something of a Bug in the author began then.

Looking through various encyclopedias and comparing, there are interesting-shaped creatures in each — but still head and shoulders above the rest in strangeness are the creatures living in the ancient and modern sea!

When I first saw the reconstructed CG of the creature groups excavated from the Burgess Shale — represented by Anomalocaris — I nearly got a nosebleed! Yes!

My personal favorite is Hallucigenia! Upon seeing it move in reconstructed CG, I

exclaimed "cute!" at an age I should have known better! The author was enraptured!

(Note: Please do not imagine the scene where the author exclaims "cute!" repeatedly, as it may be hazardous to your health.)

Truly the sea is a treasure trove of bizarre creatures!

The coelacanth, which when the author was a child was believed extinct and featured in prehistoric animal encyclopedias, now appears matter-of-factly in fish encyclopedias as though nothing happened!

While ancient species are being discovered, new species and mutant species can suddenly appear, and it's also a treasure trove of giant species.

Echizen jellyfish, for example — if you encountered one underwater with no prior knowledge whatsoever, I think you'd be prepared to die.

If that's the case with something like Echizen jellyfish, all the more so for other species! Giant octopi, giant squid, giant sharks and so on are well-known, but there are likely giant species we still don't know about.

There are many rumors of unconfirmed creatures, and sometimes the corpses of mysterious creatures are actually caught!

Oh I want to see them! Unconfirmed creatures!

Tentacles stretching from far offshore all the way to the beach!

Of course if I actually encountered something like that I'd run immediately!

...Well, whether unconfirmed, giant, or bizarre — it's because we don't know about them, because we don't ordinarily see them, that they seem that way.

From the perspective of the sea's inhabitants, the form of those living on land must seem far stranger.

But of course it's natural for unfamiliar things to appear bizarre, and perhaps for that reason, in some English-speaking countries, octopus is called devil fish.

In an old monk's dictionary of devils (not the same title as Ambrose Bierce's work), there was an entry for crab, which read: That this strange creature has some connection to the devil cannot be doubted.

Cannot be doubted no less!

What a magnificent declaration! Amazing, ancient monk!

Don't lose that pure heart!

Well, perhaps it was that kind of cultural soil that gave birth to the Cthulhu horror's evil gods mentioned earlier.

As an author, in this series I intend to keep bringing out bizarre objects modeled on the strange creatures of the sea.

That's the spirit with which I began writing this series, but the worry — if I have one — is whether the general public will agree with these tastes of mine...

...Um...

I actually have something I'd like to confirm with everyone — this word bizarre I've been using throughout... that is a compliment, right...?

No! That's fine! You don't need to answer!

A... anyway...

That's how this series started — I would be grateful for your continued company.

Kanzaka Hajime (bowing respectfully)